

THE PERIL FINDERS

BY

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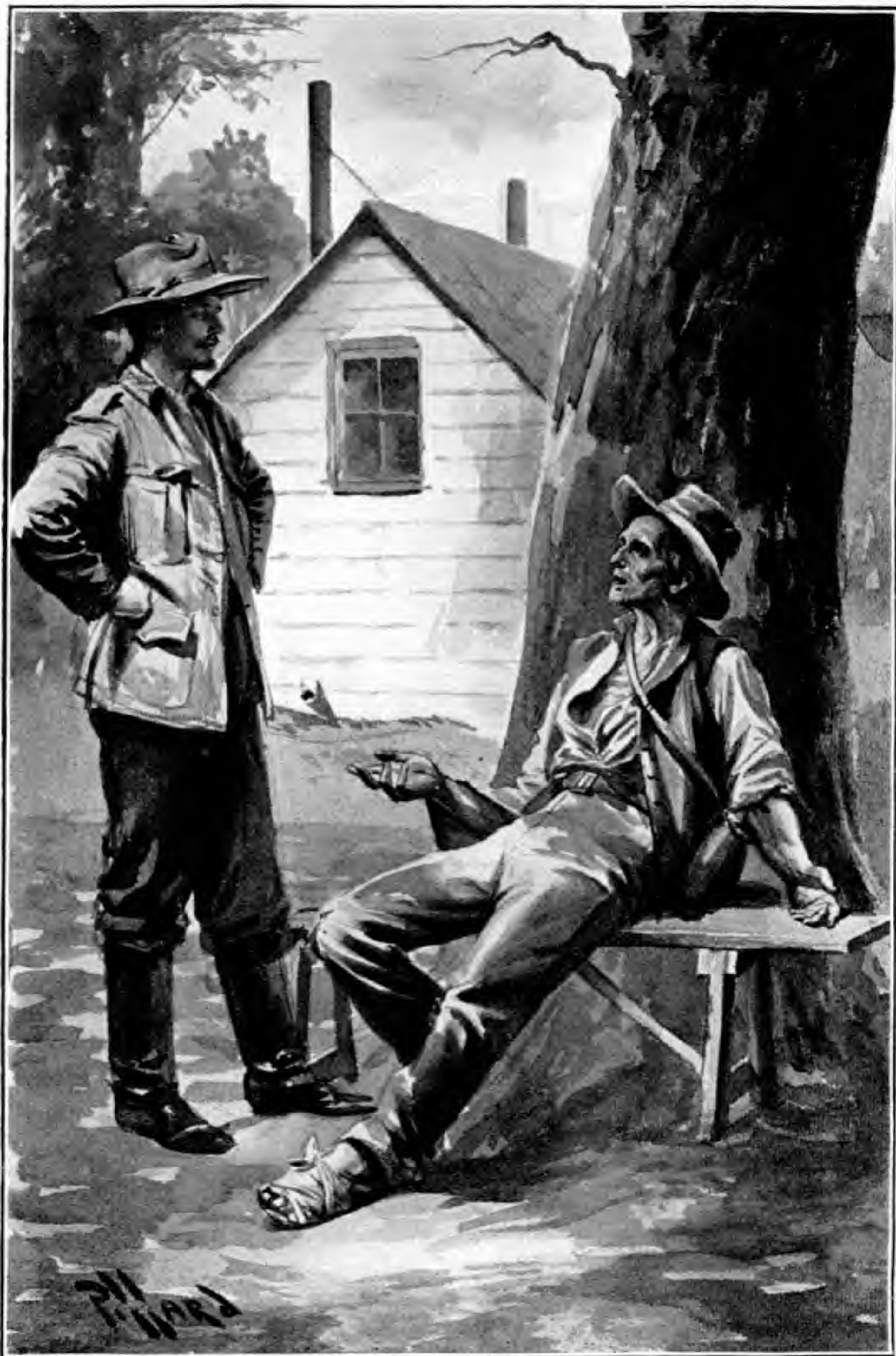
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He saw beneath the smoke which floated upwards another of the Indians
Frontispiece. rolling over.

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He sank slowly down with his back to the trunk, stretching out a long thin hand towards the doctor.

[page 17.]



His right finger pressed the trigger and there was a sharp echoing report.

[page 217.]



"Look, the forehead has been crushed in by the blow from a stone axe."

[page 317.]



They began to climb up the slope of rough jagged stones to take vengeance upon the whites.

[page 477.]



THE PERIL FINDERS

CHAPTER I

THE WESTERN PARADISE

“**W**ELL, boys, where have you been?”

The speaker, a sturdy-looking, sun-tanned man, seated upon a home-made stool at a rough home-made table in a home-made house of rugged, coarsely-sawn boards, with an open roof covered in with what one of the boys had called wooden slates, had looked up from his writing, and as he spoke carefully wiped his pen—for pens were scarce—and corked the little stone bottle of ink so that it should not evaporate in the super-heated atmosphere, before it was wanted again for the writing of one of the rare letters dispatched to England, these being few, the writer preferring to wait till the much-talked-of-better days came—the days for which they had been patiently waiting five years.

The boys looked sharply one at the other, their eyes seeming to say, “You tell him!” But neither of them spoke, and the penman said sharply—

“Hallo! Been in some mischief?”

The boys spoke out together then, and muddled or blurred their reply, for one said, “No, fa,” being his

shortening of *father*, and the other cried, "No, sir," both looking indignant at the suggestion.

"What have you been doing, then?"

"Fishing, sir."

"Good lads!" cried the first speaker, leaning back on his seat, and starting up and grasping the rough edge of the table to save himself from falling, while the boys burst out laughing.

"Yes, you may laugh, my fine fellows," said the first speaker rather pettishly, "but it wouldn't have been pleasant for me if I had gone down."

"No, fa," said his son, colouring and speaking quickly. "I beg your pardon! I am sorry."

"I know, Chris. You didn't think. I suppose it looked droll."

"Yes, sir," said the other boy, hastily. "I beg your pardon too. You thought you were in an arm-chair, didn't you?"

"I did, my boy," was the reply, given in company with a weary sigh. "But granted, granted, and thank you. I'm glad to find that though we are leading this half savage life, you young fellows don't forget that you are gentlemen."

"Gentlemen's sons, sir," said the second boy modestly.

"Same thing, Ned Bourne. Well, so we're to have a treat: fish for dinner, eh? Where are they?"

The boys exchanged glances again, their eyes twinkling with mirth, and then they burst out laughing merrily once more.

"A big basketful, boys?" And the speaker rubbed his hands.

"No, fa," cried the first boy. "We haven't caught one."

"What! Why, where did you go?"

"To the upper pool, sir," said the second boy, "and there wasn't a fish."

"Then why didn't you try the river?"

"There is no river now, fa."

"No river?"

"No, fa; it was all turned into pools when we were there a fortnight ago, and now there's only a muddy spot here and there; all the rest have dried up."

"Tut, tut, tut! What a place it is!"

"Oh, it will be better soon, sir," said the second boy cheerfully. "There'll be a heavy rain, the river will fill again, and the fish begin running up from the sea. It's such a lovely morning out, and the flowers are glorious."

"Yes, Ned, lovely and glorious," said the penman sadly. "It is, as I have often said, a perfect paradise—a beautiful garden. I don't wonder that the old mission fathers called it the Valley of the Angels. But though we can drink in the beauty of the place it does not quench one's thirst, and not being herbivorous people, we can't feed on flowers. Oh dear! Then there are no fish?"

"Not till the rains come, fa."

"And when they do come the wet will find it easy to get to your skin, Chris—and to yours too, Ned Bourne. What a pair of ragamuffins you look!"

The two frank, good-looking lads coloured through their bronzed skins, and each involuntarily clapped his hand to a guilty spot—that is to say, one covered a triangular hole in his knickerbockers and the other pressed together the sides of a long slit in his Norfolk jacket, and they spoke together again.

"I got hung up in the agaves, father, and the thorns catch like hooks."

"A nail ran into my knicks, sir, when I was on the roof mending the shingles."

"A very meritorious proceeding, my dear Ned, but there are needles and thread in the chest: why didn't you mend your knicks, as you call them? Don't let's degenerate into scarecrows because we are obliged to live this Robinson Crusoe-like life. It's many years since I read that book, Chris, but if I recollect right he used not only to mend his own clothes, but make new ones out of goat-skins. 'A stitch in time saves nine,' boys, so mend your ways—I mean the open ways where the wind and rain get in. See anything of your father, Ned?"

"Yes, sir; he's working away with Mr. Wilton up in the far orange grove."

"Far orange grove," repeated Christopher Lee's father bitterly; "a grove without oranges. Is the blight—the scale, I mean—any better up there?"

"No, sir. Father said it was a hundred times worse."

"But that was exaggeration, Ned," cried Chris eagerly. "It's very bad, but not a hundred times worse than it was last time we were there."

"Say eighty or ninety times worse, then," said Chris's father bitterly.

"No; dad's right, sir," cried Ned Bourne. "The twigs and leaves are covered with those nasty little tortoise-like things, and he says they are sucking all the juices out of the trees."

"They might have waited till the fruit was ripe," said Chris, with a grin, "and then been contented with sucking a few oranges."

Doctor Lee smiled sadly at his son, and was silent for a few moments before saying—

"That's bad news indeed, boys; it's like the last straw that breaks the camel's back. I did hope that the orange trees were going to be better this year; it would have made up for that other disappointment."

"What other disappointment, fa?" cried Chris sharply.

"Over the peaches. I've been through the plantations this morning before I sat down to write home about our troubles."

"But have the peaches got scale too, father?"

"Yes, my boy, and every other blight and disease possible to them, without counting the dry shrivelled state they are in from the drought."

"Oh dear!" sighed Chris. "There seems to be nothing here but disappointments."

"Oh yes, there is, my boy," said the doctor; "it is a land of beauty and perfect health."

"Yes, it's beautiful enough, fa," said Chris grudgingly, "and it's wonderful to see Mr. Bourne, who used to be so weak that he had to be carried out to lie in the shade,

while now he can do anything. He runs faster than we can, doesn't he, Ned?"

"Ever so much," said the lad proudly, and with glistening eyes.

"And he carried that tree to the saw-pit," said Chris; "the one we couldn't lift."

"Yes, he has thoroughly recovered," said the doctor, "and we were none of us so well before in our lives."

"But that makes it so bad for you, fa," said Chris, with something of his father's bitterness of tone. "How are you ever going to get a practice together if people will be so horribly healthy?"

"What!" cried the doctor. "Horribly healthy, indeed! Why, you wicked young ruffian, do you suppose that I want people to be ill? Thank goodness that it is such a paradise of beauty and health. Don't I have people come from a hundred miles round with their accidents—broken limbs and cuts?"

"Doctor Lee," said the other boy, who had been sitting on a flour-barrel very silent and thoughtful and with his brow puckered up, while his voice sounded eager and inquiring.

"What is it, sir? Are you going to defend Chris?"

"No, sir; I wasn't thinking about what he said, but about the way everything we have planted fails. I can't understand it."

"Can't you, my boy?"

"No, sir. We all came here from England, didn't we, to seek for health?"

"That's right, Ned."

"Father gave up his living in Derbyshire because if he had stopped any longer he would have died."

"Yes, Ned, and Mr. Wilton gave up his practice as a lawyer because his doctor said that he was in the last stage of consumption."

"But you didn't, sir."

"I was not his attendant, my boy. I had never seen him or Mr. Wilton till I met them here on this land they have taken up."

"Did you think they'd die, sir?"

"I was afraid so, Ned. I never expected to see them recover as they have."

"Then I won't say it's a horribly disappointing place," cried Ned, proudly. "I say it's beautiful and grand."

"So it is, my boy," said the doctor; "but why have you begun talking like this?"

"Oh, that's nothing to do with what I was going to say, sir," said the boy excitedly.

"What were you going to say, then?" asked the doctor, smiling.

"That I can't understand it, sir."

"Well, you said so before," cried Chris grumpily.

"Of course I did; you needn't catch me up, Chris.—I mean this, sir; I can't understand why it is that the trees and flowers and other things grow so beautifully here, while the peaches and oranges, bananas and corns are always killed by frost or want of water, when they are not covered with insects and grubs which make them wither away."

"That's simple enough, my dear boy," said the doctor gravely. "All those things which flourish so well are natives of this part of the world, and grow wild. Those which we have planted are foreign to the soil, and grow after the fashion to which they have been trained by cultivation. Nature is a better gardener than man, but fruits of the soil that she produces and which flourish so bravely are not suited to our requirements."

"Oh, I see," said Ned thoughtfully. "But what about the millions of insects? Why don't Nature's plants get blighted the same as ours do?"

"They are," replied the doctor; "only in the enormous space and amongst the millions of trees spread about, we do not notice that a part of them suffer. It is only in the plantations and orchards and gardens set apart by man for growing things quite foreign to the soil, that the damage is so plain. Nature never meant groves of oranges to flourish here, or they would have existed—at least, so it seems to me. As it is, we choose to settle down upon wild

land that has been the home of the insects which annoy us ever since the beginning of time, and plant those foreign trees, so we must take our chance of their succeeding. Who's that coming across the plantation?"

"Mr. Wilton," said Chris, running to the door.

"And father along with him," cried Ned.

"Tut, tut, tut! To dinner, I suppose," said the doctor dismally. "Potatoes and damper! Oh, boys, I did think you would have had a dish of fish."





CHAPTER II

'OUR YANKEE NEIGHBOUR'

THE gentlemen named strode into the roughly-furnished kitchen-like room, looking as unlike a clergyman and a lawyer as could be imagined, for both were dressed in well-worn garments, half farmer, half backwood settler, the one with a thistle staff or spud in his hand, the other shouldering a double gun, which, following the example of his companion, he set up in a corner in company with the spud and a couple of fishing rods and a landing-net, before going to the broad shelf over the fire-place, upon which he placed a cartridge wallet, glancing at the same time at another fowling-piece and four rifles hanging across upon hooks.

The whole place was untidy, giving the notion to an observer that no woman ever entered the shanty; but the fire-arms looked clean and bright, and the gentleman who had just deposited the canvas wallet on the mantelboard was probably answerable for the absence of dust, for he took an old silk handkerchief from his pocket, and using it liberally, flicked away a few traces of white wood-ash which had floated up from the fire smouldering on the hearth in spite of the heat of the day.

"Hallo, boys!" he said; "back again?" and without waiting for an answer, he continued, "What have you for dinner to-day, Lee?"

"Potatoes—damper——"

“Hang it all, man! There’s a tin or two of preserved meat. One wasn’t finished.”

“No,” said the doctor; “I looked at it this morning, and it had gone bad.”

“Too bad to eat—for a hungry man?”

“Yes,” said the doctor; “unless he wants to poison himself.”

“This sounds cheerful, Bourne.”

“Horrible! There, it’s of no use to save up,” said the gentleman addressed. “You must give us the last tin of bouillé beef.”

“Gone bad too,” said the doctor gruffly.

“What, have you opened it to see?”

“No; the top and bottom are both blown up in a curve with the bad gas generated.”

“Well, upon my word! Hear this, Wilton? Can anything be worse?”

“No. Who says home—Eastward Ho!” replied the gentleman addressed. “Look here, Lee; we’ve been talking it all over as we went well over the plantation this morning. Everything has gone wrong, and it’s madness to try any longer. Why, it’s five years since we agreed to join hands and lands and to work the fruit farm into a success.”

“Yes,” said the doctor sadly; “and we’ve worked like slaves.”

“I’m afraid,” said the gentleman addressed as Bourne, “that no slaves would have worked half so hard.”

“That they would not,” cried Wilton. “There, it’s a failure, and we’d better get to Frisco and take passage by a sailing-vessel while we have the money. The plantation is going back to a state of nature, and we shall waste time by trying any more.”

“We ought to stay on for a bit,” said the doctor, as the two boys stood listening eagerly and forgetting all about the poor dinner to come.

“What!” cried Wilton, with a bitter laugh. “Who’d buy it?”

“Oh, we shouldn’t make much; only enough to pay

our passages back to Liverpool. Some new-comer would be glad to have a place fenced in and planted, and with all the improvements we have made."

"I, for one," said Mr. Bourne firmly, "will not be a party to selling such a miserable failure to a stranger."

"Nor I," cried Wilton angrily. "It wouldn't be honest."

"Well, I suppose not," said the doctor sadly. "I'm afraid—no matter how little we obtained—I should feel as if I had swindled my brother-seeker for prosperity. There, I'll join with you in what you say. But what a failure we have made!"

"No, no, not altogether," said Ned's father warmly. "We have found what we ought to think better than riches. Eh, Wilton?"

"Hah! Brother-grumbler, we have indeed," said the other. "I never expected to be strong again."

"And we are," said Bourne. "Strong as horses, thanks to you, Lee."

"No, no, no, I won't take the undeserved credit, my dear fellows; thank the climate and the out-door life. The place is a regular Eden."

"Only it won't grow us food-stuffs to live upon."

"Nor fruit to sell," added Wilton. "There, we've talked it over for years, worked till we have been worn out, and hoped against hope. The plantations are the homes of plagues of every noxious insect under the western sun, so let's give it up and go."

"Agreed," said the others, and the boys joined in with a hearty "Hurrah!"

"Then you won't mind going, Ned?" said Mr. Bourne.

"No, father. I should like it—for some things," replied the boy addressed, and he looked wistfully at his companion.

"What do you say, Chris?" cried the doctor. "You want to go, then?"

"Yes, fa, I should like to go to England again, but I shall be very sorry to go away from here, for it is very beautiful, you know."

"But you'd like the change?"

"Yes, fa," said the boy frankly, "for some things. But I shouldn't like it if Ned Bourne were not coming too."

"Oh! I should be coming too, shouldn't I, father?" said the other lad eagerly.

"Of course, my boy. I dare say Doctor Lee will think out some plan by which those years of companionship may be continued," looking at his friends.

"Oh yes," cried Wilton eagerly; "that must be managed somehow. I should say——Who's this?"

"Company?" said Ned's father, turning to look through the open door towards the track leading to the next plantation.

"Our Yankee neighbour," said the doctor. "What does he want?"

"It's a patient for you, Lee," said Wilton.

"Hillo, you!" cried the new-comer, in a lusty voice, but in rather a nasal sing-song tone. "Doctor there?"

"Yes; come in," was the reply, and a tall, sun-dried, keen-looking man in grey flannels, the legs of which were tucked into his boots, dropped the butt of his rifle on the earthen floor with a dull thud, as he slouched into the room, to show the assembled party that the joke about a patient for the doctor was a good guess, and that many a true word really is spoken in jest.





CHAPTER III

THE MAN FROM THE WILDERNESS

“**H**OWDY, all on you? Two boys included. D’yer hear, nippers? I was a bit scared about ketching you, doctor. You’re wanted yonder.”

“An accident?” cried the doctor quickly.

“Accident?” said the new-comer. “Wal, yes, that’ll do. You might call him an accident, poor beggar, for he’s about played down to the lowest level. Some’d call him a loafer, but we’ll say accident—fatal accident, for I’m thinking he’s too far gone for you, friend Lee, clever doctor as you are.”

“Where is he? At your place?”

“Nay-y-y! He’s trudging along after me. I said I’d fetch the doctor to him, poor fellow, but he just found words enough to say he’d come after me, and he crept along. Yes,” continued the American, turning to the door. “Here he comes. Do what you can for him, and send him back to me; he can have one of the sheds and as much husk as he likes to lie on for the time he wants it, and I don’t think that’ll be long.”

“I dare say we can do that for him, poor fellow,” said the doctor coldly, as he stepped towards the door, and then uttered an exclamation. “For goodness’ sake, Bourne, look here!”

Both his companions and the boys hurried to the door

to look out where a strange, gaunt-looking, grey-haired figure came creeping along in the hot sunshine, walking painfully by the help of a stout six-foot stick.

At the first glance the red-brown skin drawn so tightly over his face made him resemble a mummy more than a living being, while his worn canvas and skin garments clung so tightly to him that his bodily aspect was horribly suggestive of a clothed skeleton.

Upon seeing that he was observed he stopped short, leaning forward resting heavily upon the stick, to which he clung, peering from beneath the shadow cast by his bony brows, while his eyes, deeply sunken in their orbits, seemed to literally glow.

The next moment he turned slowly towards a rough bench fixed beneath a shade-giving tree and sank slowly down with his back to the trunk, stretching out a long thin hand towards the doctor, while his dry greyish lips moved as if appealing naturally to him, the man he believed able to give that which he sought—help.

“Ugh! How horrible!” whispered Chris to his companion. “If I had seen him lying down I should have thought that he was dead.”

The boy’s idea was shared by all present, as the doctor stepped forward to their visitor.

“That’s how he looked at me when he came up,” said their American neighbour. “He can’t say a word—only point and make signs.”

“But where does he come from?”

“Over yonder,” said the American, nodding south-east. “I caught sight of him when I first woke this morning, ever so far away, and then forgot all about him for hours, when I saw him again, and he had crawled nearer, about a hundred yards an hour, I should say. He looked so queer that I went over to him, and tried, as soon as I had got over the first look, to find out who and what he was.”

“Well,” said Christopher eagerly; “who is he?”

“You know as much as I do, squire, and that’s nothing,” was the reply; “but I guess.”

“Yes: what?” cried Ned.

"Strikes me, young sir, that he's some poor chap who has been regularly swallowed up in the great desert of salt plains over yonder. Lost his way, and his wits too, seemingly. Lots have been in my time."

"What, crossing the plains?" said Chris.

"Yes. It's like getting into quicksands. I never knew of any one before getting back again after once getting well in. It's going straight away to death to go there. This one's crawled out, poor chap, but it's only to die. Look at him; he's as good as dead now, all but his eyes."

"Yes, it is horrible," said Ned, in a voice hardly above a whisper. "How can anybody be so foolish as to go?"

"Ah, that's it," said the American, with a harsh chuckle. "They've seen yellow, or fancied they have, and been dreaming about it till it's too much for them, and away they go—mad."

"Yellow?" said Chris wonderingly. "I don't understand you."

"He's making fun of us, Chris."

"Not a bit of it, my lad," said the American. "I mean it. He's had the yellow fever badly. I had an awful fit of it when I first came out here and took up land to grow things that won't grow. There were plenty of old settlers and people here in those days, who had come cram full of stories about the salt desert yonder and what it hid. They said that the old mission fathers who first came here to travel about among the Indians discovered an old city there, half buried in the drifting sand, and beyond it two great hills. They said that there was a great treasure in the city, left by the old people who had lived there, and that the hills beyond were of solid gold, waiting for any one who would risk all there was to meet and go. They said he'd come back the richest man in the world—if he did come back at all."

"And did anybody go?" said Chris breathlessly.

"Oh yes, my lad, as I said before; but no one had ever heard of any coming back to be rich. I didn't go. Hadn't pluck enough, I s'pose, or else you might have seen me

come back like that poor' chap there. Don't look very rich, do he?"

"No: horrible," said Chris again. "Look, Ned; father's doing something to him."

"Yes," said the American grimly, "and I expect we shall all have to do something to him soon."

"What?" cried Ned excitedly.

"Dig," replied the American, almost in a whisper, and the boys looked about at the beautiful scene spreading around, and shuddered as they felt the full meaning of their neighbour's words.

"Ah, 'tain't nice to think about, is it, lads?" continued the American; "much better to stop here and grow yellow oranges—not that I've found it so," he continued, with a sigh. "It's all been one horrible disappointment. Still one is alive and well, while that poor fellow——"

"But he's very, very old," said Chris.

"Old? Awful. Looks old too, from what he's gone through. I should say he has starved, and been dried up with thirst, and been hunted by those brutes of plain Indians, and had all his seven senses driven out of him. But maybe I'm all wrong, after all."

"Oh no: I think you're right," said Chris eagerly. "You must be."

"Must, eh? P'raps it's all my fancy."

"How could a man come like that, then?" cried Ned.

"That's what we've got to learn, my lad; but most likely we shall never know, for, take my word, that poor chap has found his way to this place at last as a quiet spot where he may lie down and die."

"And my father won't let him," cried Chris excitedly. "Look, he's going to do something for the poor fellow now."

The little group moved towards where the doctor was bending over his new patient; but he motioned to them to keep back, and all waited, watching him for the next ten minutes, when he beckoned to Mr. Bourne, who stepped forward, to find the stranger lying motionless and with his eyes closed.

"Dead?" he whispered in awe-stricken tones, as he gazed down pityingly at the wasted object before him.

"As near to it as he can be to remain alive," replied the doctor. "I can't let him lie here. Ask Wilton to help you bring the loose door from the long shed, and we'll get him upon it and carry him there."

"Yes," said Mr. Bourne quickly, and he hurried back to the others,

"Come for the physic?" said the American, smiling; but on hearing what was required he eagerly joined in to help, and in a few minutes the roughly-made door was placed beside the unfortunate man, who was drawn upon it and carried into the long open shed and placed upon a heap of sweet new Indian corn husks over which a blanket had been laid, a home-made pillow being fetched by Chris from the shanty the party shared, and as soon as the stranger felt the restfulness of his shaded easy couch he uttered a low sigh, opened his eyes, and looked up in the doctor's, but only to gaze in a strange, far-off, stony way.

"Going to give him something now, doctor?" said the American.

"Not yet," was the reply. "He is quite exhausted, and disposed to sleep. Did you give him anything?"

"Mug o' water with a drop of cold tea in. He seemed choked with thirst."

"Then I will wait and see if he sleeps before I do more."

"But say, mister," said the American; "I didn't show him the way here so as to plant him on to you. I thought you'd give him some pills now and a draught to take in the morning. I could have done this for the poor chap. Hadn't you better do something of that sort and let me take him back? What do you say to bleeding him?"

"When he has scarcely a drop of blood left in his body?"

"Oh, all right; I don't understand that sort of thing, doctor. But I don't want you to think I meant to shuffle from helping a man out of a hole."

"Oh, I don't think that, Griggs," said the doctor warmly; "but the poor fellow must not be moved. He's

in the last stage of exhaustion, and must have suffered terribly."

"Precious old un, ain't he?" said the American, gazing down at the head no longer covered by the rough cap of puma-skin that the patient had worn, and all noting the yellow, half-bald head and the long, thin, perfectly white hair and beard.

"A man of seventy, or more, I should say," replied the doctor gravely.

"Hundred and seventy, you mean," said the American sharply.

"No: about the age I said," replied the doctor.

"Well," cried the American, in a tone full of the surprise he felt, "yew do surprise me, doctor!"

"Let's leave him for a bit," said the doctor, as he saw that their visitor's eyes remained closed. "Perhaps he will sleep for a while."

The party backed out of the airy shed used for storing corn in the season, and often utilized in the hottest weather for a sleeping-place by the occupants of the shanty, and the strange visitor was left alone.

"I feel mean over this job, neighbours," said the American, as they moved towards the shanty; "and now I'm going to be meaner and meaner, as I am here and had no time to see to my vittling department. Got anything to eat?"

"A very poor spread, Griggs," said Wilton, smiling, "but of course we shall be glad if you'll share it."

"I call that rale kind of you, and I will stop, for I'm downright hungry, and precious little to home. I say, if the President ever sends round for us to vote a new name for this part of the State I shall propose that we call it Starvationton. Why, look here, you're a deal better off for corn and hay than I am to home," he continued, as he sat back after munching potatoes and damper, and washing all down with fresh cool water from a little spring which never failed. "White wine too as never gets into a fellow's head. But the place don't answer my expectations; does it yours?"

"Ours? No, Griggs," said Mr. Bourne sadly. "We've made up our minds to give it up."

"Not pull up stakes and go?" cried the American, bringing the haft of his knife down upon the rough table with a loud rap.

"Yes," said the doctor; "fruit-growing here is fruitless."

"Yes, because we don't get any fruit. But look here, you neighbour Wilton, you don't say anything: you don't mean to go too?"

"Indeed, but I do," replied the gentleman addressed.

"Hear him!" cried the American. "But you lads—you are going?"

"Why, of course we should," cried the boys, in a breath.

"What, and leave me nearly all alone by myself? Well, as sure as my name's 'Thaniel Griggs, I call it mean."

He looked round from one to the other, as if asking for an explanation, and rested his eyes last upon Mr. Bourne, as he added—

"On-neighbourly, that it is."

"We shall be sorry to lose so good a neighbour," said Bourne; "but what is to be gained by trying any longer?"

"Hum! That's a riddle," said the American. "Give it up. Ask me another."

"What can we do to improve our position anywhere near?"

"Hah! That's another riddle, and not so easy as t'other. Got any more, for I give that one up too."

"I think those two are enough," said Wilton merrily. "The fact is, Griggs, we have all come to the conclusion that we are wasting our lives here."

"Where are you going, then?"

"Home," was the reply.

"Ah!" cried Griggs. "There's a nice sound about that—Home. Well, I shall go with you."

"What!" cried the doctor. "To England?"

"No, I didn't say that. I'm not going to cross the

herring-pond. Your people yonder wouldn't take to me. But let's try some other place. Pull up tent-pegs and take up a location farther north, and I'll go with you. What do you say, doctor?"

"That you are wasting your life here, Mr. Griggs, and that I should strongly advise you to make a fresh start."

"Along with you and the other neighbours?"

"I do not say that."

"Eh? Not too proud to have me, are you?"

"Certainly not," said the doctor warmly. "You have often proved yourself too good a friend."

"Ah, that sounds better, doctor. Just you think over what I said, and don't be in too great a hurry to go back to the old country. There, thankye for the dinner."

"Dinner!" said Wilton contemptuously. "I wish it was."

"Might have been worse," said the American good-humouredly. "You old-country folk have a saying about, 'You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.' Well, that'll do in this case—noo version. When you go out to dinner you shouldn't look at what people give you to put in your mouth. There, I'm off. But lookye here, squires, all of you. I'm off now to go on killing blight and things, but as soon as you're tired of our wild man, just send me word, and I'll fetch him over to my place."

He gave a comprehensive nod all round and was passing through the door, but turned sharply round.

"Here, I'll just take a peep at the poor fellow as I go, doctor, by your leave—Go on tip-toe, you know. P'r'aps you'd like to go with me."

"Yes, I want to see him again," replied the doctor, and they went to the temporary hospital together, and found the stranger sleeping heavily.

"Man must have gone through a deal to get to look like that, doctor," whispered the American, as they stole away.

"A great deal more than we know, or ever shall know, friend Griggs," replied Chris's father.

"Oh, I dunno so much about that, mister. You once

get him well, and he'll spin us a yarn, I expect, such as'll make our hair stand on end."

"But how to get him well?" said the doctor, smiling sadly.

"Oh, you go on; you'll do it. See how you mended that black fellow the horse kicked to pieces. It was wonderful; made me wish I'd been a doctor myself. But there, I must be off back."

He turned away, and after another glance at his sleeping patient, who quite fascinated him by his strangely weird aspect, the doctor returned to the shanty, where he and his companions began at once to discuss the bearings of the strange incident, talking over the possibility of the man having been lost, perhaps for years, in one of the great deserts towards the south, and having at last found his way back to civilization, while the two boys sat silently drinking in every word, associating their weird visitor with wild and stirring adventures in the unknown land.

"I say, Ned," said Chris that night when they went to their rough beds, "shouldn't you like to go right off and see what the wild part of the country's like?"

"I just should," replied Chris's companion. "We'd take rifles and plenty of ammunition, and go exploring. It would be fine!"

"But they wouldn't let us go," said Chris slowly.

"Think not?"

"Sure of it. Why, if I was to ask father to give me leave he'd take me out to the long shed and say, Do you want to come back like that poor fellow there? So would your father."

"Yes. Just as if it was likely! I dare say he lost himself, poor chap. We shouldn't," continued Ned. "The way would be always to take bearings, and never lose sight of them."

"Or take a big ball of white cotton and unwind it as you go," said Chris, grinning. "You're bound to find your way back then."

"Get out! You're poking fun at me," said Ned quietly. "I know a better way than that of yours, which is of

course nonsense. How could a fellow take miles of cotton in his pocket to unwind! No: I tell you what! The best way would be—Chris!—Chris!—Why don't you answer? Oh, what a Dummkopf it is! Fast as a top in a moment! I never saw such a fellow to sleep!"





CHAPTER IV

'WENT OFF TO SLEEP'

GHRIS was, as they say, "fast as a top," but he was the first to awaken in the morning, according to his regular custom, just when the orange sun was beginning to tinge the east, and jumping up and scrambling on his clothes he stepped out into the cool dawn, with the intention of having a look at the bony features which had haunted his dreams. But just as he reached the open doorway and was about to step cautiously inside, there was a faint rustling sound which made his heart seem to stand still with the chill of horror which ran through him, for from out of the darkness where the stranger had been laid a shadowy form rose up and came forward.

The feeling of dread was only momentary, though it was succeeded by a strange shrinking from coming face to face with the awe-inspiring object of his solicitude. But the boy stood firm.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said to himself, and then wonderingly—"You, father!"

"Yes, my boy; what is it?"

"I only came to see if the man was awake."

"Half," said the doctor. "He is slightly conscious at times. You are early, my boy."

"Not so early as you are, father," said the boy, smiling. "How long have you been here?"

"All through the night, my boy."

"Oh!"

"I was afraid to leave him—he is so weak. I have had to give him a stimulant every hour to keep him alive. There, go now, and don't talk. I want him to sleep."

Chris stole away, and then stood thinking whether he should rouse up Ned to go to one of the pools higher up the nearly-dry river, and bale it out on the chance of getting a few fish after all.

But on second thoughts he let his comrade rest and went into the lean-to on the other side of the shanty, where he busied himself in lighting a fire upon the stone and setting the kettle over it, after which he went cautiously indoors, to return again with a tin canister, which upon being opened sent forth a fragrant odour.

A few minutes later he was busy over further preparations, but only to be interrupted by the sound of some one at the door giving three or four sharp sniffs in rapid succession. Then—"Pig!" came from inside. "Oh, I say, what a shame! Might have woke a fellow up to have some too."

"'Tisn't for me," said Chris gruffly.

"Oh no! I suppose not. Who's it for, then?"

"The dad: he has been sitting up all night with that poor fellow. I thought he'd like a cup of coffee."

"Good boy," said Ned. "I'll take *pig* back."

A few minutes later the two boys were making their way through the rapidly broadening morning, bearing a steaming mug of milkless coffee towards the shed, but only to stop short on hearing a strangely harsh voice talking slowly and solemnly for a few moments, before stopping suddenly, to be followed by a few words from the doctor.

Then all was silent for some little time, before Chris whispered sharply—

"Father!"

This brought the doctor to the entrance.

"Thanks," he said. "Very thoughtful of you, Chris. Go away now."

The boys hurried back to the lean-to and made up the fire, to sit talking till the other occupants of the shanty began to stir, and the rough breakfast was prepared.

"Been sitting up with the poor fellow all night, Chris?" said Mr. Bourne. "Oh, he should have wakened me, and I would have relieved him for half the watch."

The doctor was still in the shed, but he joined the rest when breakfast was ready, and answered the inquiries of his companions.

"A hopeless case, I am afraid," he said, "but I shall fight it out to the last.—What? Is he sensible?" continued the doctor, in response to a question from Wilton. "At times, but for the most part he keeps wandering about thirst and heat, and wanting to sleep. The poor fellow has evidently suffered terribly."

After breakfast the doctor returned to the shed, while the others found business to do about the blighted plantations, but working in a dull, despondent fashion, for the recollection of their previous day's consultation about giving up was still strong in their minds.

"There, let it all go for the present," said Wilton, at last. "It's no use to talk about future plans without Lee being here."

But the doctor was too busy with his patient to do more than join them at dinner, with no better report, for he felt that the man was gradually sinking. It was the same too at the evening meal, when the necessity of some one sharing the night watch came up for discussion, the doctor consenting to Mr. Bourne taking the first half of the night while he snatched a few hours' sleep.

The arrangement was carried out, with Doctor Lee ready and alert to take his position by the sufferer's bed at midnight, when Bourne announced that the patient had only moved once, to ask for water.

"I think he seems to be better. He is fast asleep now," said Bourne, after saying "Good-night!" and then he left the doctor to himself.

It was getting on towards morning when, making a faint rustling amongst the Indian corn-husks, the doctor

bent over and laid his cool hand upon his patient's brow.

“ Who's that ? ” came in a harsh voice.

“ The doctor.”

“ Water.”

This was supplied, and the sufferer lay very quiet for another hour, and then, just as the first faint streaks of dawn appeared, the man asked who was there in a stronger voice, and upon being told, said—

“ Yes, that's right ; come nearer. I want to speak to you.”

The doctor bent over his patient, whose voice as he spoke gradually grew stronger and more emphatic, and he went on speaking eagerly till long after sunrise, when he was silent for a few minutes, but only to begin talking uneasily again.

But there was silence in the long shed that morning when Chris took in a mug of coffee and came softly out again under the impression that his father's patient was asleep ; and when Wilton and Bourne came out they heard this as the report of the stranger's state.

Breakfast time soon came, and the doctor joined them as before, ready to answer the first question asked as to how his patient had passed the night.

“ For the most part talking.”

“ Then he is better ? ” cried Bourne.

“ In a way—yes,” replied the doctor solemnly, and every eye was fixed upon him now, as Wilton said sharply—

“ You mean that he is worse ? ”

“ No : better for him, poor fellow,” said the doctor sadly. “ Nothing whatever could be done, and he was in horrible pain. It is all over now.”

“ You don't mean to say——” began Wilton, and stopped short.

“ Dead ? ” said Bourne, in a solemn whisper.

“ Yes,” said the doctor gravely. “ The agony he was in passed away about dawn, leaving him calm, patient, and quite in his right senses, talking to me long and earnestly

for quite three hours, before he turned away and with a low restful sigh went off to sleep—to wake no more.”

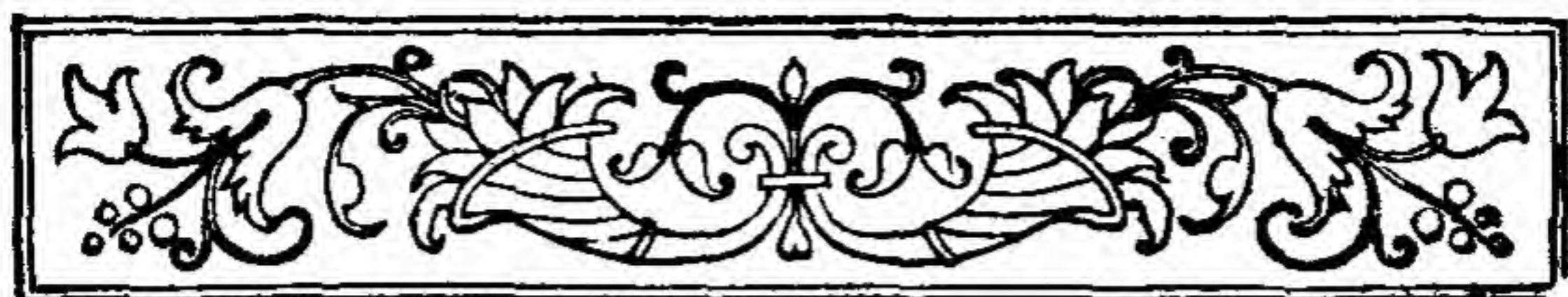
“You say he talked to you a good deal,” said Bourne; “did he say anything about how he came to be in such a terrible state?”

“Yes, he related everything to me, clearly,” replied the doctor gravely.

“Hah!” cried Wilton. “Poor fellow, he must have gone through a great deal. How did it all come to pass?”

“Give me time,” said the doctor thoughtfully. “I should like to lie down and sleep for a few hours, for I have gone through a good deal since you left us, Bourne. To-night we must lay him to rest. Afterwards I have a great deal that is very startling to tell you both—to tell you all, I should say, for the boys may hear.”





CHAPTER V

A PIECE OF SKIN

IT was late that same evening when the occupants of the shanty sat about the rough board table. The stranger had been laid in his last resting-place, Mr. Bourne had read the service over him, and the American neighbour, who had been present, had stayed to partake of the evening meal.

This latter had passed over almost in silence, all waiting then for the communication the doctor was to make; but he sat still, thoughtful and silent, till Griggs, after fidgeting a little in his chair, said—

“I can’t help feeling a bit sorry, doctor, for bringing the poor fellow over to you. I never meant him to stay.”

“You need no excuses, Griggs,” said the doctor, rousing himself from his musing fit. “It was an act of Christian charity, and I am glad that we were able to share it with you.”

“That’s right, and nicely spoken of you, doctor,” said the American; “but I wish we had been able to help the poor fellow sooner. Here, I’m burning to know how he got into such a state. I s’pose he told you?”

“He told me a great deal,” replied the doctor, “but the time was short, his words hurried, and what he said has set me considering as to how much is simple fact and how much the imagination of a diseased brain.”

"Hah!" exclaimed the American. "Then the best way will be for you to tell us too, and then maybe we shall be able to help you sort it out, and untangle the real thread from the touzly yarn."

"Exactly," said the doctor. "Well, it seems that he was one of a dozen adventurous prospectors whose brains had been excited by one of the old legends respecting the discovery of gold by the old mission fathers in one of the deserts between here and Arizona. They banked their funds together, purchased necessities and provisions, and started with a mule team and a large water-barrel furnished with pole and axles so that it should act as its own wheels, revolving and bearing its own weight—a contrivance, the poor fellow said, that answered capitally in the sandy plains, but only proved a hindrance in the rocky ground."

"Not a bad idea," said Griggs, "if it had been all plain, for, as I understand, it's want of water that has upset every expedition out that way."

"When all was ready they started, well armed, as I understood him, making for the south and west. They had certain plans which they had obtained from explorers, and went out in full hope of discovering not only a new land of gold, but a city said to exist in the middle of one of the deserts, a ruin now, but containing fabulous wealth amassed by the emperor, cacique, or whatever he was called, and fostered by the old mission fathers, who had made the city their home."

"Hah!" cried Griggs. "This makes one's mouth water. Go on, doctor."

The latter looked at him seriously, and then continued—

"All this sounded very clear and reasonable, but after a time there was so much of the marvellous in the poor fellow's descriptions that I could not help feeling that we were getting into the dreamland of an enthusiast."

"Let us hear, Lee," said Wilton.

"To be sure," cried Griggs.

"I say that," said the doctor, "because, as I seemed to gather, the adventurers had not been above a month upon

their expedition before misfortunes began to assail them, and he talked for long enough about getting amongst Indians who seemed to be always on the watch to hinder their advance."

"Yes," said Mr. Bourne thoughtfully, "I have read that the Indian tribes have had handed down to them by tradition the existence of great sacred treasures which they are bound to protect, and which would have been discovered long enough ago but for their watchfulness."

"Never mind the Injuns," said Griggs. "You're sure to meet them if you go south, and, treasure or no treasure, they are always on the kill and rob system."

"I wish they wouldn't talk so much, but let father go on," whispered Chris.

"They had fights desperate and many with these people," continued the doctor, "but they pushed on, to find as they plunged further into the desert that there were worse enemies to encounter."

"Oh, that's nonsense," cried Griggs; "he must have been off his head a bit there. It's the regular old cock-and-bull story about dragons guarding the treasure. I know those sort of things—magic and gammon."

"No," said the doctor, smiling; "the enemies he meant were drought, heat, and fever, all of which helped to slay his brother adventurers. Some perished at the hands of the Indians, but more from exhaustion and disease, so that at last, after going through the most terrible privations, he found himself the sole survivor."

"That's bad," said Griggs, "and bad at that. But, I say, how long did this take?"

"I don't know, and he could not explain. Time seemed to be quite out of his calculations. It must have taken years, for he said that he was a young and vigorous man when he started."

"But look here," said Griggs, "Murrica's a big place, and I s'pose he joined Mexico on to it in his travels; but you could get over a deal of ground in years. How far away was it from here?"

"Distances seemed with him to be alike," continued

the doctor. "Much of what he said in this respect seems to me to be all imagination, for he talked of the vast unknown land that he and his companions had penetrated, and in which they passed away, leaving him alone."

"Poor chap, to find out that the gold story was all a hatch-up, and that he had given up the best years of his life in a great hunt after a yellow nothing. Well, go on, doctor."

"There is not much more to tell you," was the reply.

"Then I'm right," said Griggs; "he went through all that to find nothing."

The doctor was silent for a short space, before he continued.

"No," he said; "you are wrong, according to the poor old adventurer's account, and here comes the strange part of his story. He said that he believed he went raving mad after being forced to cover the remains of his last companion with pieces of rock, and for a long time he could think of nothing but getting back to civilization; but the more he tried the more he seemed to be led deeper and deeper into the great hot, sandy, stony wilderness. It was as if something from which he could not escape kept on driving him to continue the search upon which he had started, till one day he came upon a wider and more level plain of salt and sand, while in the distance, far down upon the horizon, he could see a clump of mountains, towards which he made his way, toiling on day after day, week after week, as it seemed to him, and the range seemed to be always receding with tantalizing regularity, while he was parching with thirst and the tops were covered with snow.

"At last, though, when he had been compelled to lie down and rest every few steps from exhaustion, and after months of toil, he reached the foot of the mountains."

"Poor fellow!" said Griggs. "They must have been a long way off, and no mistake. In dreamland, I'm afraid."

"And I too," said the doctor. "This part of his narrative is very suggestive of a fever dream; but he spoke

calmly, and as if he believed every word to be true. There was a simple earnestness, too, in the way in which he told me of how, dried up as he was, he revelled in the ice-cold water that trickled down from the mountain-peaks in stream after stream which only meandered for a few hundred yards before every drop was soaked up in the burning sand."

"That's the worst of the salt plains southward," said Griggs quietly.

"I suppose so," said the doctor, and this sounded very simple and truthful, but it seemed to me that here fiction was a good deal mingled with fact. He went on to say that these were the mountains of which he and his friends had been in search, for he was not long in discovering now that those hills were composed of the richest gold ore, while in a central tableland some two thousand feet up stood the remains of the city of which he had been in search.

"This proved to be completely ruined, one mass of crumbling stone wall; but every here and there he discovered proofs that the old inhabitants had utilized the rich metal contained in the hills by which they were surrounded. The place had evidently been destroyed in some catastrophe, in all probability by the attack of an enemy, for not a trace save charred beams remained of the woodwork that must have been plentifully used, and in many parts he found the scattered and gnawed bones of the slain."

"I should like to explore that place, doctor and neighbours all," said Griggs, "but I'm afraid that the nation of people who built that city belonged to the imagination."

"That was my own idea," said the doctor gravely, "especially when the poor fellow told me that he made his home there for years, taking possession of a little temple-like place, covering the roof in with cedar-boughs to keep off the sun, and living upon what he could secure by means of his gun."

"And always getting a fresh supply of powder and shot from Noo York by mail, eh, neighbours?"

"The narrative is most improbable," continued the doctor, "but it does contain elements open to belief."

"But if he had discovered such treasure as that," said Wilton, "why didn't he get back to civilization, so as to profit by it?"

"To be sure," said Bourne. "But what about the Indians who ought to have been there to watch over the gold?"

"He did not mention them," replied the doctor; "but his reason for not returning was that the poor fellow felt that he dared not attempt to go through the same horrors that he had encountered on his way out. He had friends with him then, but now he was alone, weak, and wanting in spirit. In fact, much as he longed to get back to civilization, he dared not attempt the journey, but kept on putting it off for years."

"For years, eh?" said Griggs derisively.

"Yes, for years, in the hope of some travellers or prospectors accidentally discovering the place. At last, though, he seems to have wakened up to the fact that if ever he was to see civilization again it must be by some effort of his own, and so he made the venture, to suffer terribly, and finally crawl here to die, as we have seen."

"But he told his story," said Griggs, "and I don't know, doctor, but it half seems to me as if you believe in the poor old lunatic."

"I told you in the beginning that I was somewhat disposed to credit his history."

"Oh, come, Lee," cried Wilton.

"My dear Lee," cried Bourne. "Why, this legend of treasure cities and golden mountains is as old as the hills."

"Yes, I know. I have heard it and read it time after time."

"And don't know any better now, doctor," cried Griggs. "Oh, come, I say, what is there in this story that makes you more ready to believe it than any of the others?"

"The simple fact that I have seen and talked with the

historian—one who was ready to give me some tangible idea of the truth of his narration.”

“Tangible?” cried Bourne.

“Yes; tangible.”

“Why, he had got no specimens with him, had he?”

The doctor made no direct reply to the American’s question, but went on to tell that his patient had concluded his short history by thanking him for his patient kindness.

“‘My life has been a failure, doctor,’ he said; ‘you can make yours a great success. Mine was used up in discovering the great treasure. It was the work of years and years. You can go straight to the place by the bearings I have marked down for you as I came back. There, I give you that for which I have died, glad to be at rest. It is yours, and yours alone.’”

“I tried to draw his attention to another subject,” continued the doctor, but he smiled.

“‘You think I am only a madman,’ he said sadly. ‘In your place I should have thought the same. You believe that the treasure is only in my weary brain. I am clearer now, and I can see by the way you look at me; but it is true. Take the skin belt from round my waist. It is yours. In it you will find what I brought from the hills. There are a few ounces, but where I broke the pieces off with a lump of stone—half gold—there were tons upon tons.’”

“I was not aware that he was wearing anything beneath his rags of skin, but when to satisfy him I cut through and drew away his pouch-like belt, I could feel inside it pieces of something hard.”

“Gold!” cried Griggs excitedly, and the boys’ eyes shone with excitement.

“I don’t know,” said the doctor quietly.

“What, didn’t you look?” cried Wilton.

“No; the exertion he made in trying to lift himself so that I could draw away the belt was too much for him, and every thought went to the effort to revive him from his swoon; but it was all in vain, the poor fellow came to sufficiently to show that he was conscious, and caught my

hand in his to draw it towards where the belt lay. He pressed my fingers round it, and then lay gazing at me wildly as I bathed his face, till I awoke to the fact that I was trying to revive the dead."

There was silence then for a few moments before Wilton spoke the words that the two boys were eager to utter.

"I'm afraid it's all the poor fellow's dream," he said. And then, "I have no hunger or thirst for gold, but I must confess to a feeling of excitement and desire to know what is in the belt."

"Open it then, and let's all see," said the doctor, and he drew what looked like the well-rubbed and stained skin of a serpent about four feet long from his jacket pocket, and laid it upon the table.

"Skin of a rattler—a copperhead, I should say," cried Griggs. "Well, not a bad idea for a cash belt. There's something hard in it anyhow," he continued, as the doctor let the end drop. "But I say, look here: don't open it for a few moments, because I don't want for us to be disappointed."

"I don't think we shall be," said Bourne. "It is quite possible that in his wanderings the poor fellow found gold, even if he magnified his findings in his imagination."

"That's right, parson," cried Griggs, "but you don't see my point. What I meant about being disappointed was this—supposing this long shot-belt sort of thing does hold so many nuggets of gold, what then?"

"What then?" cried Wilton. "Why, it is gold."

"To be sure; but what about finding the tons, doctor?"

"By the bearings the poor fellow mentioned," replied Chris's father.

"Right again, sir," continued the American; "but the bearings—where are they?"

Every one looked hard at the speaker in silence.

"I don't want to chuck cold water on what may mean a fortune for you, doctor,—but look here: I'm not a sailor, but I do know that when you go to find anything by the bearings you have a sort of map or chart with compass

points on it, and arrows and dots and marks to guide you in the way you are to go. What about them? Had he a pocket-book anywhere?"

"Nothing of the kind," replied the doctor, "and I was surprised to find his belt."

"Then the poor chap died a bit too soon, and he's taken his secret with him, I should say."

"It seems so," said the doctor. "I had forgotten all that," and the boys drew a deep breath as they suffered each a sharp pang of disappointment.

"Well, I thought it just as well to speak out, doctor," said Griggs.

"I wish you hadn't, sir," cried Wilton angrily. "You seem to have crushed out our hopes."

"Better to know the truth and the worst at once, my dear Wilton," said Bourne.

"Oh, I don't know that," replied Wilton. "The idea of discovering tons of gold does stir one a bit."

"Hah!" sighed Chris, who was indulging in a golden dream, and he kicked out one leg under the table, involuntarily catching Ned on the side of the ankle in a way which made him utter a yell.

"Here, don't shout like that, young squire, because you're a bit disappointed," cried Griggs; and without waiting for an explanation, he continued, "Well, doctor, I vote that the belt be opened. P'raps, after all, these inside are only bits of glittering stuff such as some people think is gold, but which is only iron and sulphur. Anyhow, let's look."

"Open it, Wilton," said the doctor, and the former sat with his elbows on the table holding the snakeskin belt with his hands near the ends, so that they hung down over the fingers, softly lissome, while the horny middle sank in a curve.

"Let's have it, squire," cried Griggs. "Go on ahead. You look as if you were making a plan for a suspension bridge over our creek when it's full of water."

"The skin seems to have been slipped off the snake by turning it over from the mouth," said Wilton, whose voice

now sounded rather hoarse. "Those ends are wonderfully soft too, as if the skin had been well tanned."

"Not it," said Griggs; "say it was only dried in the sun, and then rubbed soft. There, let's see what is in it. Hold it up by the tail, and the nuggets 'll all fall out."

Wilton did as he was told, but the nuggets—if there were any—did not fall out, for the neck of the snake had been strained and dragged out till it was thin like the tail part, and had doubtless shrunk to its present proportions after the stones or metal had been carefully placed inside. The consequence was that Wilton shook and shook in vain.

"I should take out my knife, open it, and slit the skin right up, if it was my job," said Griggs indifferently.

"No, no; it would be a pity," cried Bourne.

"I could do it," cried Chris—"if I might."

"Try, then," said Wilton, who hastily threw the long skin down, his hands being wet with excitement, which showed in a deck upon his forehead.

Chris eagerly snatched up the belt from where it lay, and then dropped it, startled by the warning uttered loudly by Griggs.

"Take care!" he cried. "That's a rattler's skin, with the head complete. P'raps there's both poison fangs in the skull still."

"Ugh!" cried Chris.

"There, pick it up again, young un," cried Griggs, laughing. "There's nothing there but skin. The poison fangs went along with the flesh and bones."

"Of course," said Chris shortly. "How stupid! Here, catch hold of the tail, Ned."

The next moment the round belt was stretched out between them, and Chris's hand as he passed it along the middle felt within it so many hard round pieces of something about as large as marbles. While confining his attention to the one nearest the head, he worked it along to the mouth, and let it fall with a sharp rap upon the table, to lie shining dully in the light shed by the hanging spirit-lamp.

"Quartz with gold in it, and no mistake," cried Griggs eagerly.

"Gold, with some specks of quartz in it," cried the doctor, raising the heavy roughly-rounded and hammered fragment nearer the lamp.

"Yes, three-quarters gold," said Wilton, while after taking it in his fingers and handling it for a few minutes, Bourne laid it down with a sigh.

"Let's have some more, Squire Christopher," cried Griggs; but the words were hardly out of his lips before there was again a sharp rap on the table, and then another and another, the boy continuing till a dozen of the dull frosted-looking specimens lay upon the boards, shining with a soft dull glow.

"Excessively rich ore," said the doctor, breaking the silence, after the party had been busily turning over the pieces.

"And no doubt about it, doctor," cried Griggs. "Well, that's yours, anyhow."

"No," said the doctor quickly. "You brought the poor fellow here."

"Right, but you doctored him and made him able to speak. 'Sides, he gave it to you, and it's yours. What's more, he gave you the hills where the tons of it lie—somewhere."

"Yes, somewhere," said the doctor; "but where is that?"

"Where the poor old chap came from. He ought to have given you the map with all its bearings marked down. Are you sure that he hadn't got it in his pocket?"

"Certain," replied the doctor, "for he had no pockets."

"Well, sewed up then in his jacket?"

"I carefully examined that so as to get some information about him."

"Of course," said Griggs. "Nothing more inside the serpent, is there, Squire Chris?"

"No," replied the boy, after running his hand along the soft skin until it touched Ned's. "It's all stuffed full of

something at this last part to keep the gold from getting any further."

"Yes, that's it," said Ned; "so as to keep the gold in the middle, and leave the ends soft to tie together."

"It doesn't quite feel like that," said Chris thoughtfully. "If that had been meant, why wasn't there a sort of soft roll of something at the head end? I say, father, there is something like a roll."

"Draw it out then, my boy," was the reply.

"It won't come," said Chris. "We shall have to slit the skin here."

"Nay, skin it out as if it were a bit of the rattler's body left in. Pull the mouth open over the neck. No, no; not like that. Draw it open a bit. That's the way. Now you'll do it, my lad."

Chris jumped at the American's hints, and acting upon them, found that the task was comparatively easy, and in a few minutes a little roll of soft cream-coloured leather, about an inch in diameter and eight or nine long, carefully wound round with what looked like fine twine, but proved to be a remarkably fine kind of animal integument, lay upon the table.

"Leather of some kind—I mean, soft skin," said Griggs, bending over the little roll as it lay before them. "Say, doctor, I'm beginning to think you've got the bearings after all. You must use your knife this time."

"Yes," said the doctor, taking out a many-bladed knife, and then pausing to pass the object round before going farther.

But the roll was returned to him quickly in the impatience felt by all to see whether it should prove to be a scroll containing valuable information, and the doctor inserted the point of his knife beneath the thin twine-like bond. There was a sharp sound as it was divided, and upon being unwound there before the party lay the edge of a roll of very thin, carefully smoothed, yellowish skin, looking like badly-prepared vellum, only feeling far more soft.

"A map, or writing," said Wilton hoarsely.

"A map, I'm sure," said Bourne.

"That's about it, sir," cried Griggs. "Say, neighbour, you've made a find, and the old man wasn't so mad as he looked."

"So it seems," said the doctor, rather breathless in spite of his calm self-contained nature, accustomed to crises.

"Are we on the brink of a great discovery?" said Wilton. "If so, how does the matter stand?"

"It's the doctor's find," cried Griggs, and the two boys began to breathe audibly as they rested their chins in their hands and seemed to devour the little leather scroll.

"No; you brought the poor fellow here."

"Tchah! What's the good of fighting about what we haven't got?" said Griggs, laughing. "What do you say to whacks?"

"What!" cried Bourne.

"Share and share alike all round, when there's anything to share."

"To be sure," said Wilton.

"And I say that the youngsters come into the swim; only look here, young squires, if there's nothing you get nought."

"Agreed," cried the boys, in a breath.

"Agreed all," cried Griggs merrily. "Now then, doctor, open the roll and let's see; but before you begin, who'll buy my share for ten cents?—What, all silent? No buyers? Tchah! There's speculation! I won't sell it now. Read away, doctor, and let's hear—or see."





CHAPTER VI

A WILD-GOOSE CHASE

THE doctor carefully opened the roll of skin upon the table, while Chris turned the lamp up a little higher, keeping one eye upon his father's actions the while and then scanning eagerly the plainly-seen marks which pretty well covered the little guide.

For that it was evidently intended to be, so as to give future searchers an easy means of reaching the treasure that the unfortunate adventurer had discovered.

All gazed down at the skin, which had been smoothed out, and for some minutes not a word was spoken. But it did not take long for the whole of the party to come to the same conclusion, and it was this—

That the adventurer had taken great pains in the preparation of his map for another's benefit, in case he should not be able to seek for the treasure himself, but that to make his chart available it needed something more.

Griggs was the first to give his feelings words, which expressed the thoughts of the rest exactly.

"This is all very well," he said, as he wrinkled his brow and scratched his head viciously, "and it's very nicely done for a man who seems to have begun by making his own makeshift for paper, and then his own pen and ink. What do you make this skin to be, doctor?"

"The nearest guess I can give is that it is the skin of a jack-rabbit that has been pegged out tightly and dried in the sun."

"Same here," said Griggs; "but what about the ink?"

"Ah, that looks like charcoal ground very fine, mixed with water and some kind of tree gum, and painted on with a pointed piece of wood."

"That's just what I thought it might be," cried Griggs, "and a deal of trouble the poor fellow has taken with it. Look here, neighbours, east and west and north and south plain enough. What does he say here?—'Des^t.' Yes, that's right enough, and means desert. Plenty of it too. And what's here?—'No water.' Of course, and over and over again, 'N.W.' That means no water, of course. Mountains under these stars. Plenty of 'em too. More desert, and then three stars set triangle fashion about what looks like a square box with some one's name on it."

"No," cried both boys together; "it's 'temple.'"

"So it is, boys," cried Griggs, "and these dots all round it—I mean all square about it, must mean the city walls. Well, that's clear enough."

"Look there," cried Chris.

"Yes, I'm looking," said Griggs. "What is it?"

"That big W.," said Chris. "That must mean 'water or well.'"

"Very likely, my boy," said the doctor.

"And these square bits must mean houses, I s'pose," continued Griggs. "Well, it's a prettily-done, careful sort of map, made under difficulties. Mountains here and mountains there, and all the rest desert. But he means whoever uses the map to go straight for the place, by sticking in all these little arrows right away from the north-east corner across the desert to the temple."

"Yes, that's the way to go, plainly enough," cried Bourne.

"That's what I thought, neighbour."

"Well, then, what are you finding fault about?" cried Wilton sharply. "You talk as if you despised it."

"Oh no, not I, squire. It's a very pretty little map, and took the poor chap a long time to do; but it seems to me that it's no good at all."

"I don't understand you," said Wilton sharply. "Look here, he gives a starting-place marked with a big dot, and the little arrows go right across to the three mountains and the temple."

"That is how he described it to me," said the doctor.

"Just so, sir. That's how I understand it, neighbours; but what then?"

"Why, of course!" came in chorus, as every one at the table grasped the hitch that the American had seen.

"Ah, you all hit it now," said Griggs, laughing.

"I think I understand what you mean," said the doctor thoughtfully.

"So do I," came in chorus, and then Bourne said quickly—

"Suppose you speak out and say what you mean, Lee."

"It seems to me," said the doctor gravely, "that though this chart has been prepared so carefully, and points out the trend of the deserts and mountains, and also where the gold-hills, the city, and the temple stand, while the points of the compass are shown as well, it might be a chart of any part of the country, a mere patch, or a territory of great extent."

"That's so, doctor," interposed Griggs; "but you haven't quite hit it yet."

"No, but I was coming to your point directly. You mean that the map gives us no hint of the direction in which the gold-hills lie."

"Now you've hit it right in the bull's-eye, doctor," cried Griggs. "That's it. Say we made up our minds to go and look for it, starting from here, are we to begin north, south, or east? Couldn't go very far west, because that would mean going straight out to sea."

"Of course—of course!" was chorused.

"But we could find the place, after all," cried Chris excitedly.

"How?" said Wilton.

"Mr. Griggs can tell us which direction the poor old fellow was coming from."

"No, he can't," said the personage spoken of. "He was zig-zagging about all sorts of ways, and more than once after a stumble I saw him get upon his legs and go back the same way he came, as if he was half blind."

"Oh!" cried Chris, in a disappointed tone.

"You meant, young squire, that if I could tell you the direction from which he had come, all we should have to do would be to go right along his track till we saw the three mountains?"

"Yes, that is something like what I thought," said Chris, who felt damped.

"Wouldn't work, youngster," cried Griggs. "Even if he had come on the last day in a straight line that wouldn't help us about how he came on the other days; and as to his trail—why, the poor old fellow had been on the tramp for years. Look here, all of you; I'll give you another chance for a spec. I'll take five cents for my share. Who'll buy? Don't all speak at once. What, no one? Well, you are a poor lot! Only five cents. Well, never mind; if you won't make yourselves rich it's no fault of mine. I'll keep my share myself in a goose-quill stopped up at the end with wax—when I get it."

"I should very much have liked to go in search of that place," said Wilton, who hardly heard their American neighbour's words.

"And I too," said Bourne. "Setting aside the gold discovery, it would be most interesting to visit the relics of the ancient city."

"I could do without seeing the old place," said Griggs dryly. "Depend upon it, you'd find it terribly out of repair. I should be dead on the gold. How do you feel, doctor?"

"I should like to explore the old place," he replied, "but I certainly should make a point of getting all the gold I could."

"Then why not try and find the spot?" cried Chris. "It must be somewhere south."

"Yes," cried Ned. "Oh, father, don't let's give up without a good try to find it."

The doctor laughed at the boy's eagerness.

"Somewhere due south," he said; "a nice vague direction. Somewhere due south may mean anywhere between here and Cape Horn."

"No, no, father," cried Chris; "not so far as that. I haven't forgotten all my geography since I've been here, and I know that there are plenty of desert regions such as that poor fellow may have been wandering in between here and Panama."

"Hear, hear!" cried Griggs. "But give us one or two, squire."

Chris grew red and uncomfortable, but he caught his father's eye looking keenly at him, and he spoke out.

"I don't know about being exactly south," he said. "Perhaps some of the places lie east; but the old man might have been wandering in the mountainous parts of Colorado or Lower California, or—or——"

"New Mexico," whispered Ned.

"Yes, New Mexico, or California, or perhaps have got to Mexico itself."

"Well done, our side!" cried Griggs, thumping the table. "Three cheers for our own private professor of geography. To be sure, there's desert land in all those places, as I've learned myself from fellows who have been there. But what's Arizona done to be left out in the cold?"

"In the sun, you mean," cried Chris eagerly. "That's the hottest and dryest place of all of them."

"To be sure," said the doctor—"the arid zone."

"Dessay it's true," said Griggs. "I vote we go and see."

"Why not Lower California, or one of the other States?" said the doctor dryly.

"To be sure, why not?" said Griggs, and the boys, who smelt change in the air, thumped the table.

"Quiet, quiet, boys!" said the doctor sternly. "I'm afraid, neighbour Griggs, that your plantation would suffer

a good deal during your absence on such a wild-goose chase."

"What! My plantation suffer?" cried Griggs, chuckling. "Oh, come, that's too good a joke, doctor! Suffer? Have you been round it lately?"

"Not for a year past," was the reply. "I've been too busy slaving over our own."

"Then you don't know. Why, my good neighbour, it's in nearly as bad a condition as that poor old fellow we have just buried."

"Have you tried to sell it to some immigrant?"

"Have I tried to swindle some poor fellow just come into the country?" cried Griggs sharply. "No, I haven't. I don't set up for being much of a citizen, but, 'pon my word, doctor, I wouldn't be such a brute as to even give it to a man on condition that he would live there and farm it. Your joint plantation here is bad enough, but my bit's ten times worse."

"I join issue there," cried Wilton sharply; "it can't be."

"Oh, can't it!" cried the American. "You don't know what it's took out of me. Why, I'd have pitched the whole thing up a couple of years ago if it hadn't been for you three here."

"What had we to do with it?" said Bourne sharply.

"Everything. I used to see you folk and these boys plodding along, working like niggers, no matter how your crops turned out, and waiting patiently for better times to come."

"Well, what of that?" said Wilton. "Of course we wanted to get on."

"So did I, squire, and seeing you all keep at it so when I wanted to chuck up, I pitched into myself and called him—this chap, 'Thannel Griggs, you know—all the idle, lazy scallywags and loafers I could think of, and made him—'Thannel, you know—so ashamed of himself that he worked harder than ever. 'They've all cut their eye-teeth, Griggy, my boy,' I said, 'and they wouldn't keep on if there wasn't some good to come out of it by and by,' and

after that I worked away. But now you all talk of giving up, and say you've proved that there's no good in the place, what's the use of my niggering away by myself?"

"You'd sooner go on such a wild, harum-scarum search as this, eh?" said the doctor, looking at the tall, sun-burnt man grimly.

"To be sure I would. There'd be some fun and adventure in it."

"And risk."

"Well, yes, neighbour; I don't expect it would be all honey. There'd be some mustard and cayenne in it too."

"And danger of wasting your life as that poor fellow yonder did his."

"Some," said the American coolly. "You can't make fortunes without a bit of a fight. I came here to this place to make mine, but there's no stuff here to make it of. If we should find the gold-hills now, that would be something like. The fortune's already made. All it wants is for us to go and pack it up and bring it away."

"To find it first," said Ned's father bitterly.

"Nay, it's already found, parson. The poor old boy found it, and gave the job over to the doctor here, along with those title-deeds."

"Which don't say where the land lies."

"Oh, never mind that. I boggled about it at first, and thought it was a regular blind lead. But I don't now. Amurrykee isn't such a big place as all that comes to. There's the gold somewhere, and we've got some sort of a guide as well as the right to it. We're none of us so old that we can't afford to spend a few years, if it's necessary, in hunting through first one desert and then another. Can't you see what a chance we shall have?"

"I must confess I do not," said the doctor.

"Well, I do, sir. We shall have those places all to ourselves. There'll be no one to complain of our making footmarks over their gardens and strawberry-patches."

"What about the Indians, Mr. Griggs?" asked Bourne.

"The Injun? Yes, there's the Injun, but we shouldn't

go as one. We should be half-a-dozen, and if the 'foresaid Injun takes my advice he'll stop at home and leave me alone. I ain't got more pluck in me than most fellows have, but though I called 'Thannel Griggs all the lazy coons I could lay my tongue to, I've a great respect for that young man. Selfish or not, I like him better than any fellow in this country, and I should no more mind drawing a straight bead on the savage who tried to kill him than I should mind putting my heel on a sleeping rattler's head while I drew my knife and 'capitated him. There, now."

"Self-preservation's the first law of nature, friend Griggs," said Wilton.

"Is it, now?" replied the American. "Then all I can say is that number two and all the rest of her laws have got to be very good ones if they come up to number first, sir. Oh, I shouldn't stop for no Injuns if I made up my mind to go, sirree. I should chance that, *practise* up my shooting, and never go a step without having my rifle charged in both barrels."

"But can't you see that the chances are very much against any one finding this place?"

"No, sir. It'll be a tight job, no doubt; but what one man could do, going without the slightest idee where to go nor what there was to find, surely half-a-dozen of us, counting the young nippers in, could do, knowing that the gold's there waiting for us, and that we've only got to find the right spot."

"Only!" said Bourne sadly.

"Yes, sir, only. There, if I talk much more I shall want to go back home to see if there is one ripe orange on my plantation that I can suck. So I'll just put my opinions down straight. Those is them—I say, Squire Ned, that's bad grammar, ain't it?"

"Horrible," replied the boy, laughing.

"Never mind; you understood it. Look here, gentlemen, there's a fine chance here for a fortune, and I say, have a try for it, and take me with you to help, share and share alike. I'll work with you, fight for you, and share

all the trouble like a man. It's worth the try, and I think so much of it that if you say downright that you won't go I shall see if I can find a trusty mate, and go myself. There, that's all."

Griggs threw himself back on his seat so as to get his back square against the wall, tilting the stool on two legs, and looked sharply round the table, and then at Wilton, who had risen and come round to him to offer his hand.

The American looked at the long brown fingers and then up in their owner's face.

"What's that for?" he said. "Want me to shake, and then go home, because you're tired of me?"

"No," cried Wilton fiercely. "It's for you to give me yours. I say you're right, Griggs. The place must be found, and I'll go with you to work and fight, and through thick and thin, for I believe in you as a true man. I'll go with you, and we'll find the treasure or come back worn out to die."

"Not we!" cried the American, seizing Wilton's hand in his strong grip. "I'm with you, to stick to you, Mister Wilton, like a brother man. I'm ready to start with you to-morrow, if you like, if the doctor here will hand over that dockyment.—Any more going on?"

The two boys sprang to their feet and looked at their fathers, who spoke as one man.

"Sit down, boys!" they cried.

"Why, you rash young reprobate," cried the doctor. "Do you mean to tell me that you'd go off on this mad journey without asking my leave?"

"No, father, of course not. Ned wouldn't either without Mr. Bourne's consent; but I want to go with old Griggs, who has always been such a good fellow to us, and I feel sure you and Mr. Bourne both mean to go too."

"What makes you say that, sir?" cried the doctor sternly.

"Oh, first because Mr. Wilton's going, and you'd neither of you like him to go without you."

"Any other reason, sir

"Yes, father. It seems to me that as we are going away to make a fresh start, it would be much better to go in search of this treasure than to be sailing straight back to England, not knowing what we should do when we got there."

"Oh, that's what you think, is it, sir?" said the doctor. —"By your leave, Bourne!—Now, Master Ned, pray what do you think about it all?"

"Oh," cried the boy addressed, speaking to the doctor, but looking hard and searchingly in his father's face, "I want to go with Chris, of course, and I think just the same as he does. Why, it would be grand, Mr. Lee. We should have no end of adventures, and see the beautiful country."

"And the dismal desert. Why, you romantic young dreamer! You'll never see a place south of here half so beautiful."

"But what's the good of its being beautiful if we can't live upon it?"

"Then you'd be glad to go?"

"Oh yes, sir," cried Ned.

"Humph! Well, Bourne, it seems then that you and I will have to go back to England empty and alone."

"No, you won't, father," said Chris quickly. "I shouldn't go without you went too."

"And I shouldn't either, father," said Ned huskily, as he went and stood behind his father with his hands resting on Bourne's shoulders.

"Here, I wish you two young fellows had held your tongues," said Griggs roughly, "because it's like filling a man full of pleasure, and then making a hole and letting it all out again. But it's all right, lads, and thankye all the same. No, you can't go away and leave your two dads; it wouldn't be right, and you couldn't expect to prosper if you did. But I wish they'd think as we do, and say they'd go and chance it. Raally, doctor, and raally, Mr. Bourne, I'd go to bed and sleep on it. P'r'aps you'd feel a bit different in the morning. What do you say?"

The doctor was silent for a few moments, gazing full in the American's face, the latter receiving the look without blenching.

"Let me see, Mr. Griggs," he said; "I've known you nearly four years, haven't I?"

"Four years, four months, doctor, and that's just as long as I've known you."

"Yes," said the doctor, at last. "Bourne, what do you say to all this—shall we go and sleep on it?"

The two boys caught hands and gazed hard at Ned's father, who was also silent for a few moments, before he drew a deep breath and said firmly—

"Yes, Lee, old friend, I say let us go to rest now, think deeply, and as we should, over what may mean success or failure, and decide in the morning what we ought to do."

"Shout, boys," cried Griggs, springing up. "Not one of your English hoo-roars, but a regular tiger—*ragh—ragh—ragh!* That's your sort. They mean to go."

"Yes, Griggs, old neighbour," said the doctor; "in spite of all the terrible obstacles I can see plainly in our path, I feel that to-morrow morning my friend and I will have made up our minds that this is too great a thing to give up easily, and that we shall decide to go."





CHAPTER VII

ALL FOR GOLD

IT was not until the doctor rapped sharply at the wooden partition that separated the boys' from the men's quarters at the shanty, that the murmuring buzz ceased.

"Look here, you two," he said; "if you don't want to sleep we do, so just be quiet. It's somewhere about one o'clock, and when getting-up time comes you'll want to sleep."

"All right, father," said Chris, in a very wakeful tone; "we won't talk any more."

But they did, in a whisper, for something in the way of recrimination began.

"It was all your fault," said Ned. "I wanted to go to sleep hours ago, but you would keep beginning again about the bothering old chart."

"Oh come, I like that!" replied Chris. "Who kept on wondering whether we should meet Indians, and whether they scalped people now!"

"Well, yes, I did say something about that. Only fancy, though, how horrid!"

"Shan't! We're to go to sleep. I say, though, Ned; think we shall really get away from this bothering old hoeing and weeding and killing blight?"

"Can't think: I'm nearly asleep."

"Oh, what a thumper! You're as wide awake as I am."

S-n-n-o-r-r-r-e !

"Gammon !"

"Oh !" and a sudden jump.

"What's the matter ?"

"You stuck a pin into my leg."

"Must have been a mosquito."

"I'll skeeter you to-morrow morning, Master Chris !"

"Don't wait : do it now !" (defiantly.)

"You coward ! You know that if I hit at you the doctor would jump up in a rage."

"No, he wouldn't, because we'd creep out through the open door and go into the shed. Come on ; I'm ready."

"I shan't. I want to sleep."

"I don't. I can't. I feel all over of a tingle. I should like a set-to. Come on out, and then I should like you to skeeter me."

"Don't be a fool, Chris. Let's go to sleep and get ready for to-morrow. My word, what a day we shall have ! It seems wonderful. I can hardly believe it's true."

"That is," said Chris, for there was an angry rap on the partition, given by the doctor, who felt as nervously excited as the two boys.

The final rap brought calm, though, sending the lads off into a deep sleep which lasted till sunrise, when they stepped out of their rough bunks, hurried down to the water-pool to have a bathe, and had just finished bathing when Chris caught sight of the tall gaunt figure of the American striding through the Bartlett-pear plantation.

"*Coo—ee !*" cried Chris.

"Oh, there you are, young 'uns," came in reply. "Mornin'. Well, what time will you be ready to start ?"

"Directly after breakfast," cried Chris.

"Packed up your duds ?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, look sharp."

"All right. But if we go——"

"*But if !* Why, we are going."

"I hope so," cried Ned. "But I say, Griggs, what are

you going to do about your shanty? Are you going to lock it up and leave the key with the nearest neighbour?"

"Tchah! Nonsense! I'm going to put together what I want in a mule-car, ready for hitching the two kickers on, and then I'm going to take a hammer and a bag of spikes, and nail up the door and window. I shall advise your gov'nors to do the same here."

"But of course we shall take no end of things with us," said Chris.

"You won't, my lad. We shall load up two or three cars, but it will be with meal and tinned meat, bacon and ham. Tea, coffee, and sugar, of course. Ammunition, a few tools, a waterproof or two, and a tent. That's all."

"What about clothes?"

"Oh, we shall bring them on our backs. It's going to be light marching-order, I can tell you."

"That won't matter," said Ned. "I shall like it. I say, Griggs, it'll be like one long jolly great picnic."

"Yes, if we keep well, and the Indians let us alone."

"But, shall we meet Indians, Griggs?" cried Chris excitedly.

"Not we. Sooner go miles round; but they'll meet us, I expect."

"Oh!" said Chris thoughtfully. "But what for?"

"To get our mules and carts, and all we have with us."

"But what about ourselves?"

"Oh, we're no use to them," said the American dryly. "They'll pitch us aside as so much rubbish—if we'll let 'em."

"Get on!" cried Ned. "He's talking like that to frighten us. But I say, Griggs, what about the gold?"

"Well, what about it?"

"If there's tons upon tons of it, how are we going to bring it away?"

"Ah, yes. I've been thinking about that," said the American dryly, "and I've settled upon this."

"Yes! What?" cried the boys eagerly.

"To find it first. It's of no use to settle how you'll cook your bird till you've caught it."

"But we couldn't expect the mules to drag tons of metal across the desert."

"Oh yes, we could, easily. We might expect a deal more than that; but they wouldn't do it."

"Get out! He's laughing at us, Ned."

"Of course I was. Here, are your governors up yet?"

"They weren't when we came out," replied Chris.

"Well, I wonder at them, I dew," said Griggs. "Sleeping, with an idea like this to think about. I never had a wink all night. Say, this is going to be a change from pruning and weeding, eh?"

"Oh, it's glorious—splendid!" cried the boys.

"Is it? Wait a bit. Now come on; you're dressed enough, ain't you?"

"Yes, quite right now."

"Then let's go and hunt up the gov'nors. I want to know whether they really mean business."

"Oh yes, they'll go," cried Chris.

"Think so?"

"I feel sure of it."

"So do I," added Ned. "My father's quite eager to go."

"*Ragh!*" cried Griggs. "I was afraid that after sleeping on it they'd draw back. This is good news, boys, for, oh, how tired I am of drudging on here for nothing! Come on."

There was not much need for coming on. They had not gone halfway to the big shanty before they came suddenly upon the doctor and his two friends, who met them with the customary good-morning.

"Well, Mr. Griggs," said the doctor, "you've come to say that the idea of last night is wild and impossible."

"Who told you so, sir?" cried the young American.

"No one. I only came to that conclusion."

"Then you thought wrong, sir, and perhaps it was what you had made up your mind to yourself."

"Oh no, Griggs. We have decided quite the contrary. If there is any drawing back it will be on your side."

"That's right then, sir. When do we start?"

"As soon as we have settled our affairs and bought the necessary stores."

"But we shall try and find a purchaser for the plantation—of course, at a reasonable price," said Bourne. "Just about the value of what we have put into the place, the building and the tools."

"If we wait for that, gentlemen," said Griggs, "we shall never get off. But you try."

"Yes, we will try," said the doctor. "Of course it will be amongst the settlers a few miles round."

This was decided upon, and the doctor and Bourne rode off that morning, making a tour of about thirty miles from plantation to plantation, before they returned, tired out, to the evening meal, and found Griggs busy with Wilton and the boys just finishing up the task of thoroughly cleaning and oiling the firearms.

"Back again, then?" said Griggs. "Will you want my hammer and spikes, gentlemen?"

"Your hammer and spikes?" cried the doctor, wonderingly. "What for?"

"To lock up your doors and windows here, same as I'm going to do mine."

"Oh, I see," said the doctor. "Yes, I expect we shall."

"Didn't find no customers then, sir?"

"Customers?" cried the doctor querulously. "Every one wanted to sell. My impression was that not one settler we broached the subject to would have taken our plantation as a gift."

"That's about how it stands, sir," said Griggs. "They wouldn't. Why should they? It would only make them more work and less profit. You do as I do, sir—I mean, as I'm going to do: nail up the doors and shutters. I don't suppose any one would meddle with the shanty. If he did he couldn't take away the land, so it would be here all right if you ever came back and wanted it, which isn't likely, is it?"

"Not at all," said Bourne emphatically.

"Didn't say you were going gold-hunting, I s'pose, sir?" asked Griggs.

"Not exactly."

"Then some one did ask questions?"

"Everybody did," replied the doctor, "and I said we were going prospecting."

"Oh, you might have said the real thing, sir. They sneer at you as much for one as for t'other. But that don't matter. I don't know, though: if they knew as much as we know we should have the whole settlement after us; not that I should mind every one I know having a nibble at the yellow cake, but where half-a-dozen people might manage to find enough water, fifty folk would die of thirst, and perhaps tell us it was all our fault."

"Yes, the smaller our party the better, I say," said Bourne.

"Which means I'd better stop out of it, sir," said Griggs shortly.

"No, it does not, Griggs," cried the doctor warmly.

"Cer—tain—ly not," added Bourne. "You will come with us, of course."

"Well, I——"

"That'll do, Griggs; no backing out," said Wilton shortly.—"Now then, what about stores?"

"I propose that two of us decide what money will be necessary, and then go over to Mainton with two mule-carts and spend it on such things as we shall want. That will take a week, including the obtaining a sufficiency of ammunition."

"Which means plenty, gentlemen, for we might be regularly besieged in our wagon, and have to beat the Injuns off."

"I don't anticipate that," replied the doctor calmly, while the boys felt their nerves tingle; "but we will be prepared. Then we shall come back—I mean those who undertake the task will come back, and that will be all that is necessary to be done, save having one or two good discussions as to the route we shall take. Then we'll start upon our wild quest."

"Wild indeed, I'm afraid," said Bourne.

"Nay! Not it," cried Griggs. "We've got plenty of time."

"And plenty of room," said Wilton, laughing.

"To be sure we have," continued Griggs. "Lookye here, I've been thinking this little bit of a job over, and it seems to me as plain as A B C."

"Indeed!" said the doctor, smiling. "How do you make that out?"

"This way. We've got the map of the part where it is."

"Certainly, and all we've got to find out is whereabouts that part lies."

"Of course: and there lies the difficulty."

"Difficulty, doctor? Not it. Now, just look here. We've got, say, three States where it's likely to be. Say, at a guess, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico."

"Oh yes, and California, Texas, and you can join on Old Mexico."

"Nay, nay; the three I said will do for a beginning. If neither of them turns out right we'll begin on one of the others. Say, we give two or three years a-piece to the first lot. We've plenty of time, as aforesaid."

"Then you are going to set aside nine years of our lives to begin with, and when they are gone—wasted—begin another nine years?"

"Time won't be wasted, doctor; we shall have found out something or another."

"The question seems to me," said Bourne, "is it worth the trouble?"

"If we'd got to spend nine more years in making a fortune here, doctor, we shouldn't think the time too long."

"Perhaps not."

"Well, it wouldn't be in getting the gold, even if it took nine years, and if we're lucky it mightn't take nine months. It's all chance whether we hit on the right trail to begin with or at the last."

"It's a wild and desperate adventure," said the doctor sternly, "and only excusable on the ground that we have wasted years upon this plantation and are now in a desperate state."

"Oh, don't call it desperate, doctor. We're going on a job that's going to be full of fun. We've only got to hold together pluckily to do it. Why, it's as easy as easy."

"To go and seek blindly through three great States for the spot delineated on this rough map?" cried Bourne.

"We shan't go blindly, sir; you may depend on that. We shall keep our eyes open pretty wide," said Griggs, with a merry look at the boys. "Now, look here, gentlemen, I tell you I've been thinking all this out, and it seems to me that we can cut it all down into a small patch."

"How?" said the doctor.

"By getting rid of all the outside useless bits of the job."

"I don't understand you," cried Wilton. "Hard or easy, I've made up my mind to see the thing through; but just explain a little more what you mean, Griggs."

"That's right enough, sir; I will. Now, look here; we've got our map, or plan, or whatever you call it."

"Yes," said Bourne.

"It's not very good writing, nor yet nicely finished off, but to my mind one thing's very clear, and it's this: wherever the ruined city is it must be somewhere that hasn't been settled by emigrants and ranchers."

"Certainly," cried the doctor; "that's clear."

"Very well, then, sir; if you think a moment you'll see that you clear away thousands o' square miles of settled country at once, where we needn't go to look."

"Yes, he's right there," said Bourne. "Go on, Griggs."

"Give me time, sir. Well, then, the only parts we've got to search are those where the country's quite wild, and no one been there but Indians."

"Exactly," said the doctor.

"Then the parts we have got to search are not half so big already, being only the bad desert lands."

"Good," cried Wilton.

"Here's where the map comes in now, gentlemen," continued Griggs. "What does it say on it—what does it show?"

"Very little," replied Bourne.

"That's true, sir. I could make a better map myself; but it does show one thing, and that is that the gold city lies amongst the mountains."

"Yes, quite true," said the doctor.

"Then here you are, sir: if the gold city lies amongst the mountains it can't be any good for us to go hunting for it among the plains."

"Of course not."

"There you are, then, sir. Look, as the proper maps 'll show you, what a big hunch of these three States we're going to search is marked off as prairie-land."

"To be sure."

"Then that as good as halves what we've got to go over again. We've got to make for the mountain-path; always till we find those three sugar-loafy bits the poor fellow marked down. Why, neighbour, we're cutting off a lot of pieces that we shan't need to meddle with. You see, it's coming down and getting less every time we begin to work."

"There's a deal in what you say," said the doctor thoughtfully, "but the country is immense."

"So was the Atlantic Ocean, sir, when Mr. Christopher Columbus set sail in his ship to find land. That was jumping right into the darkness."

"Hear, hear!" cried Bourne and Wilton together, and the boys hammered the table.

"Yes," said the doctor, more thoughtfully, "and he had nothing but a kind of faith to work on. You are quite right, Griggs; we have some grounds to go upon."

"Instead of deep water, sir," said the American, grinning.

"And you being captain of the expedition, Lee," cried Wilton, "will have a far better chance of success."

"Shall I? I don't see why."

"You will, because you'll have a smaller crew, one that will not rise in mutiny against you and want to go back."

"How do I know that?" said the doctor dryly.

"Because we promise you, to a man—and boy—eh, Chris—Ned?—that we'll stick to you to the end."

"Of course," cried the boys together; while the others said, "Hear, hear!"

"That's all very well," said the doctor dryly. "We're sitting here comfortably at this table, and in this shanty, and rough as it is we have found it a comfortable home. We've had our evening meal, and we're going to lie down for a good night's rest. But wait till some day when we're all worn out with hunger and fatigue—out, perhaps, in some thirsty desert—without a roof to cover us, and surrounded by dangers such as at the present time we cannot conceive. How will you feel then—what will you say then?"

"Never say die, father," cried Chris.

"Britons never shall be slaves," cried Ned.

"Nor Yankee Doodles neither, doctor," cried Griggs, laughing.

"I say we'll all stick to our captain like men," said Wilton warmly.

"And I that I shall clap you on the shoulder, Lee, and say, Thank goodness, we've fought through our troubles so far, and that, please goodness, we'll go on bravely to the end."

"Hah!" exclaimed the doctor, uttering a long-drawn sigh. "Yes, I find I shall be better off than Columbus, and I begin to feel that with such help I shall have a much easier task. There: we'll go. Our friend Griggs has put quite a different complexion on the expedition, and I begin to think now that all we have to do is to keep on till we find the ruined city."

"If it exists," said Bourne.

"If it exists? Oh, it must exist, if you can say that of a dead city," cried Wilton.

"The poor fellow we buried may have invented it all, being so bent upon his search, and gone crazy at last and made up that chart out of his own head."

"No," said the doctor thoughtfully. "I had the advantage of you others in being with him during his last moments, and hearing him talk calmly and sensibly to the

end. He had suffered horribly from fever, and doubtless had been delirious again and again, but that chart was the work of no madman; half-an-hour's conversation with him satisfied me that he knew perfectly well what he was talking about, and, after all said and done, there is nothing preposterous in what he told me. We have had proofs enough of there being rich gold-loving nations in North, South, and Central America who built great temples—the Mexicans, the Peruvians, and the nations who have left the huge ruins in Yucatan. I do not see why there should not be another gold city and temple here."

"Here!" said Bourne dryly. "Where?"

"In the desert place among the mountains that we are going to find, my dear sir," said the doctor firmly.

"*Ragh! Ragh! Ragh! Ragh!*" roared Griggs enthusiastically, and the boys joined in the "tiger," as he called it.

"Don't say any more, doctor," he cried. "That's enough. I began to think you were playing fast and loose, and I said to myself, Doctor's got too much shilly-shally, willy-nilly in him to make a good leader of this expedition, but I don't now. I can see farther than I did, and that you've been weighing it all over and looking before you leaped. And that's the right way to succeed. Gentlemen, and you two youngsters, we've got a grand captain—one that can lead us and guide us, and cure us, and set us up when we're down. What more can we want? We're sure to succeed. I won't sell my share now for anything."

There was a fresh cheer at this, and the party broke up to take the necessary rest.

"Ned," said Chris, after they had been in bed a short time, "we're off."

"Yes," said Ned. "*Ragh! Ragh! Ragh!*" as Griggs has it."

"Hush, or you'll wake my dad."



CHAPTER VIII

SHUTTING UP SHOP

“**I** DIDN'T believe we ever should start,” said Chris, one morning at daybreak.

“But you were wrong,” said Ned, “and here's good-bye to the old place.”

It was a month later, during which time the journey had been made to the nearest town, the stores and other necessities purchased, and after preparations which had lasted till midnight, every one had declared that there was nothing else to be done, and all had lain down to sleep, Griggs included, he having decided to stay at the ranch for the last night, after bringing over his baggage and animals, and he had by a gruesome kind of choice elected to sleep in the long shed.

“Where the poor old adventurer was put,” he said, “and that will make me dream about him and perhaps have some happy thoughts about the best way to go.”

There were not many farewells to bid, for the settlers at the nearest plantations were scattered widely about the district, and all for the most part too much worried about their own disappointments to pay much heed to a few neighbours who were giving up and going to try their fortune elsewhere, and for the most part were ready to sneer at the restless folk who were going prospecting where, according to their own ideas, they were not likely to do half so well.

Hence it was that as soon as it was light, and while Griggs with a hammer and spikes was nailing up the last windows and the door, for which pieces of board cut to the exact size lay ready, there was not a stranger there to see them off.

It was a busy time. They had all breakfasted by the light of the out-door fire which had boiled their coffee, cooked their damper, and frizzled their bacon, and now were all hard at work loading the dozen mules that had been purchased for the purpose of carrying their baggage, and in whose management every one had taken lessons from an old mule-driver who had made many journeys into the Far West.

For there was much to learn. "Obstinate as a mule" is a good old proverb, and the party had plenty of reason for learning its truth. They had heard too of the vicious nature of these same animals. They were used as beasts of burden, and they seemed to have made up their minds to be a burden to every one there. The old Yankee, who had made many a journey with mule teams, had taught them, and taught them well, all he could about the mysteries of lasso and lariat, and the diamond-hitch; but even after a fortnight's practice it was not easy to bind the loads well balanced upon each mule's back without getting kicked, and when this was done, the mules having been disappointed at not being able to kick anybody, mostly made desperate attempts to kick at nothing, the result of which was the loosening of the ropes so that the loads rattled and in one case went flying.

This load had been tied on by the boys, who stood looking at one another and then at the mule, which, as soon as it was free, gave its ears a few twinkles, shook its shabby tail, and then began to graze quite contentedly on some alfalfa grass, or lucerne.

"Come, boys, don't stand looking on," cried the doctor. "Try again, or we shall be waiting for you. You must put your feet against the brute's side and haul tight, as you were taught."

"We did, sir," cried Ned, who was hot and angry.

"Not tight enough, my lad. You'll soon do it better."

"Not with this one, father. It's such a beast."

"They all are, my boy," said the doctor, laughing at his son's perplexed countenance.

"I mean such a wretch, father. It's so artful. When you've got the load on all right and balanced, and there's nothing to do but tighten the lariat, the nasty, spiteful, cunning brute waits till you begin to haul tight, and then fills itself full of wind and swells itself out. Then you pull till all is as tight as tight, and fasten off the knots."

"Well, that's right," said the doctor, who looked, like the rest, wonderfully business-like and ready for the journey, in leather Norfolk jacket, knickerbockers, and cowboy's hat.

"Yes, so we thought, sir," said Ned, "till I heard the brute sigh."

"Oh, poor thing, it was because it had such a heavy load."

"No, it wasn't, father; it was because it was breathing out all the wind again, and we didn't know what it meant till we found that the load was all loose, and when we went up to tighten it the wretch wheeled round and tried to kick us, and because it couldn't it kicked itself out of its load."

"Never mind, don't waste time, Chris. I want to start. We'll halt somewhere at midday for a rest, and set things right. After a few days' practice we shall get on better, and all these things will come easy."

"I hope they will," said Chris, as the doctor went off to where the carefully-folded tent and its poles and stretchers were being secured to another of the dozen mules which formed their team. "But look here, Ned, old chap, I'm not going to get in a passion now; I'm going to save it up, and before long I'm going to show this gentleman which of us two is going to be master."

"Oh, nonsense! My father said that we were to break the mules in with gentle treatment. They are obstinate, he said, because they've become so used to being beaten."

"Old Dence told me that kindness is thrown away upon a mule. He said you must let go at 'em with your tongue and a good thick stick; but if when you're using it you see one lay its ears down flat and draw its lips away from its teeth and laugh, it's because you don't hit hard enough. Well, this one did."

"Yes, I saw the brute grin," said Ned.

"Well, just you wait. I'm going to save up this fellow's dose, and he shall have it some day with interest."

"He told me," said Ned, "that you couldn't drive mules without using bad language. He did—lots."

"Yes, I heard him," said Chris.

"I told my father, and he was angry and said it was all nonsense. All you had to do was to shout at the brutes loudly, and as if you were in a rage. Then he laughed, and told me what to do."

"What was that?" said Chris, rather breathlessly, for he was busy arranging the mule's load.

"He said I was to stamp and yell, and begin to decline a Latin noun to the mules."

"Oh, bother the Latin nouns!" said Chris pettishly. "Who's to think of cases when you're driving a mule? Here, come on and help. And I say, I nearly forgot."

"Forgot what? I dare say we've forgotten lots of things."

"But we mustn't forget this. We're loading the leading mule, and it's the one that wears that bell round its neck. Where is it?"

"The bell? Last time I saw it was when father hung it on one of the gun-pegs over the fire-place."

"Oh!" exclaimed Chris, "and old Griggs is just finishing nailing up the door."

"Then he'll have to un-nail it again," said Ned grumpily. "Hi, Griggs!"

There were two or three echoing raps with the hammer, and then a couple of finishing blows, before the American cried—

"Hallo, there!"

"You're nailing up the mule's bell."

"Who says so?" and there was the commencement of the driving in of another nail.

"I do," cried Ned. "You must open the door again."

Rap, rap, rap, rap, bang, bang, bang, as another nail went home.

"Can't be done."

"But we must have that strap and bell."

"Come and fetch it then. It's hanging on the hitching-up hook at the end of the house."

"Oh!" sighed Ned in a voice full of relief, and he ran to the place specified, to lift down the bell and the collar-strap, to come back ringing it loudly.

"Hoi! Hallo, there! Steady!" cried Wilton excitedly. "Don't do that."

Ned gagged the bell at once by thrusting his left hand in its mouth and holding the clapper; but the little peal he had rung had done its work of setting all the mules in motion, bringing them all up close to the ringer, who found himself in the midst of a knot of squealing and kicking brutes, who diversified their vicious play by running open-mouthed at one another to bite.

But they were all loaded at length, there was a final look round, and then a move was made for the long shed, whose big door gaped wide, and as their footsteps were heard there was a shrill neigh from within and the sound of impatient stamping.

"This looks like a start at last, doctor," said Griggs, who came up last.

"Yes, at last," said the doctor.

"Got the map all right, sir?"

"Yes, in my saddle-bag. You said you had done everything that fell to your share."

"Everything but locking up this door, sir, and here are the keys," cried the American, holding up a leather bag, in which he jingled the hammer and a few of the big nails within.

"That's right," cried the doctor. "Now then," he shouted, "every one tighten his mustang's girths a hole

or two, and sling his rifle across his back before mounting. Got your revolvers, boys?"

"Yes, father—yes, sir!" came in response, and the next minute half-a-dozen rough-looking wiry cobs were being unhitched and led out through the low doorway, to stand champing their big bits, fidgeting to be mounted and given their heads for a canter.

"Every one see that his bag and blanket are all right," cried the doctor; and then Griggs' voice was heard.

"Some one take my nag's rein," he said. "Will you, Squire Chris?"

For answer the boy reached out and took hold of the strap, casting his eye over the sturdy little steed, which seemed too small to carry so tall a man as its rider.

Chris noted that there was the long hide lasso-rope curled up and hanging in its place by the saddle-bow, and that the saddle-bags were in their places, carefully strapped on, so that a tin bucket, which was also hung behind, should rest on one and not prove a nuisance to horse or rider.

Ned was close to his companion, and he said—

"I say, it would have been much better if we had kept to our old idea and had, say, three light mule-carts. What a lot of these odds and ends we could have stowed out of the way."

"I said so to old Griggs," replied Chris, and then he was silent.

"Well, what did he say?"

"Only grinned at first."

"Well, what then?"

"He said it would have taken so long and been so expensive, because we should have had to send an army of men on first to make a road all the way we were going."

"Which means he was laughing at you."

"Grinning, I call it. But I suppose he's right, because when you come to think of it, there'll be no track, and a lot of our travelling will be in and out among the mountains. There, that's the last door," said Chris with a sigh,

as there was a loud bang following the creaking of hinges that had been rarely used. Directly after Griggs' hammer came into play, making the horses restive and back away from the noise to the full extent of their reins.

"Yes," said Ned, with a sigh, "the last door. I say, Chris, now it has come to it, don't you feel a bit sorry to go away from the old place?"

"Horribly," said the boy in a low, husky voice. "What fun we used to have!"

"Yes," said Ned, "before everything got to be so dull because things failed so and made my father so low-spirited."

"He wasn't so low-spirited as my father was; but I s'pose there wasn't much difference," replied Chris, to the accompaniment of Griggs' hammer and the fidgeting of his nag. "Quiet, will you, stupid! He isn't going to hurt you."

"I say, how jolly grumpy it used to make Mr. Wilton."

"Hah!" ejaculated Chris. "A year ago he was always ready for a bit of fun, fishing, snaking, squirrel-hunting, or seeking honey. But there, no wonder; he felt like father, that it was all lose, lose, lose, and that it was unfair not to be at work."

"And it took all the fun out of our games."

"Yes, no more games now, Neddy. Father said last night when we were alone that we must bid good-bye to being boys with the place—leave all that here, and begin to think of being and acting like men."

"Yes, and my father said something like that to me, Chris; and somehow now it has come to making the start I don't feel as if I want to be a man yet. It was so jolly to be a boy here in the dear old place. Oh, bother the old gold! I wish that poor old chap hadn't come here to die."

"So do I," said Chris, and his voice sounded very husky now as he gazed round him at the many familiar objects. "I say, look how my apple-tree has grown!"

"Yes, and my pear," said Ned quickly. "It has beaten your old apple all to bits."

"Well, of course it has," said Chris roughly. "Pears do run up tall and straight and weak. Apples grow stout and strong and slow."

"They've done well enough."

"Yes; but then see what pains we took to water and manure them. Nothing else has done well."

"No, nothing. As father says, it has all been like slow ruin coming on; but I like the dear old place all the same, because we helped to make it out of the wilderness into a great garden. Oh, Chris, I wish we weren't going."

"So do I, but it's of no use to go on wishing. We should have felt much more miserable when we were starting to go back to England, not knowing what we were going to do. We should have had to go, and this is going to be like a great roving holiday, seeing something fresh and new every day."

"So it will be. There, I begin to feel better now. I say, look at the sun rising— isn't it glorious!"

"Always is," said Chris cheerily. "How different it makes things look! I always feel better when the sun shines. There, good-bye, old place, if we never see you again."

"But I say, Chris, we might come back some day, you know."

"Not likely."

"Why? We might find the gold, and then come back here to live. It wouldn't matter then about the peaches and grapes and things failing."

"No; father wouldn't want the money then," said Chris thoughtfully. "I should like to come back, after all, but——"

Bing!—BING!—BANG!

"That's done it, sir," cried Griggs, his voice ringing out cheerily in the morning air. "I'll tuck the hammer and nails in my pouch. They may come in useful. No, I can't; it's full. I'll tuck the hammer handle through my belt. Either of you youngsters got room for a few nails in your pocket?"

"I have, Griggs," cried Chris quickly, and, with something to do, the pain of the farewell to the beautiful scene came to an end.

"Ready?" cried the doctor sharply.

"Aye, aye!" came back, and the horses shuffled and spread their legs.

"Mount!" cried the doctor, and every one sprang to his saddle amidst the stamping of the mustangs' feet. "Lead on, Griggs," cried the doctor.

The American pressed his cob's sides and trotted to where the leading mule stood browsing, ready to raise its head, shaking the bell violently, and make a vicious snap at the horse's neck with its bared teeth.

But Griggs was ready for it, and threw out one of his long legs, the toe of his boot catching the mule in the cheek and spoiling the aim.

"Look here, my fine fellow," he cried, "don't you try that game again, or I'll fix a spike to the end of a stout hickory ready for lancing those gums of yours. I'm afraid you've got toothache, or you wouldn't be so ready to bite. Now then, ring up. Get on."

"Forward!" shouted the doctor; and as the mule led the way under the American's direction the whole heavily-laden team filed after, settling down steadily enough, the horsemen bringing up the rear, looking like a little detachment of irregular cavalry as they wound along the tracks through the blighted plantation, straight away for the uncultivated wilds.

"Good-bye to five years' labour," said the doctor, turning in his saddle for a last look.

"Five years' disappointment," said Wilton sadly.

"Five years of buried hopes," said Bourne slowly; but the boys were silent, neither daring to trust his voice.

"And now," cried the doctor, "for five years of unburied hope and looking forward to the future. Here, boys, you ought to give a cheer. Who'll lead?"

No one: the moments were too sad, for there seemed to be a thick black veil hanging before them right in

front, and neither dared to think of what might be to come.

Onward, onward into the future, with the wilderness unseen waiting to swallow up the adventurers in the unknown way—the perils to be encountered happily hidden from them as yet.





CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT SCARE

IT had been decided that they should make for the farthest part known to them south and west, where the wildest country lay, and they had been twice before, Griggs having paid double that number of visits in search of game. There the cultivation ceased entirely, for the rich soil gave place to sage-brush and a far-stretching tract of salt or alkali desert, Griggs proposing that they should cross this, for after a good deal of questioning the settlers in that direction, he elicited the information that one of the settlers upon the verge of the good lands had seen a strange-looking tramp, as he called him, pass his lonely shanty one evening, but feeling no desire for any such company he had stood back among the trees, and his place had certainly not been seen by the stranger.

"That shows we should be a bit nearer where he came from," said Griggs, "and it would be a fair day's journey for a beginning. We could find a spot to camp out for the night, and start early the next morning to see if we could not cross the bad land before dark."

"How far would it be?" asked Bourne.

"Ah, that we must find out from the man who lives nearest to the edge," replied Griggs. "He's pretty sure to have been some distance into the desert shooting, and even if he doesn't know he'll be able to tell us where we

can find water, for that's what we must always go by. When it's too far off for a day's journey we must take our bottles and the little casks full."

The mules soon steadied down; the day was hot, but not unpleasantly so, and after crossing a very wild patch some miles in extent they picked up a track and followed it, to come upon cultivated land again, and the track led them to a shanty built upon the bank of a river also dried into a series of pools; but as they approached the house and obtained a near inspection of the cultivated ground it became very plain that no hoe had been between the rows of fruit-trees that year, and on riding up to the shingled wood house, they found no sign of living creature—no ducks paddling in the pool, or fowls pecking about near the enclosed yard; all was still and silent. They had come upon another sign of failure, for, as far as they could see, the place had been deserted for quite a year.

"A sign that we are not alone in giving up," said the doctor; "but it will make a capital place for our first halt. Go and see what the water is like in that farthest pool, Chris. This one is nearly all mud."

Chris urged his mustang forward towards where there was a glint of water through some trees four or five hundred yards ahead, but he had not gone one-fourth of the distance before he was overtaken by Ned, who was as eager as he to see what the place was like.

They soon knew—a carefully-tended Far-West estate, given up and allowed to go back to a state of nature. Fruit-trees had been planted in abundance, but as the boys got farther from the house the wild vines and weeds were gradually mastering the useful trees, and in another year or two the plantations would have lost all trace of the hand of man and be wild jungle once more.

"I dare say there'll be fish enough," said Chris. "This is a deeper pool than we generally see. I say, how sandy the ground is here!"

The next minute they realized why it was so sandy, for instead of its being a cleared track it proved to be

the dried-up bed of a little sandy river, one that linked the pools together when the wet season came on.

"It looks as if no water had been along here for a twelvemonth," said Chris. "Look there."

His cob had seen the object at which he pointed first, and stopped short with its ears pricked forward to where, grey and glistening, a snake lay basking in the hot sunshine amongst some stones, but now, alarmed by the snort given by Chris's mustang, it began to glide away, passing amongst some dried-up reeds and leaves, giving forth its strange soft rattling sound with its tail the while.

"Well, we don't want to waste powder and shot on him," said Chris. "Come on," and they rode on to the edge of what proved to be a shallow lagoon some acres in extent, from which they startled a few waterfowl into flight, the ducks, as they splashed along the surface before rising, starting off other occupants of the pool in turn, a little shoal of fish darting off and raising a wave which marked their course towards the middle, where, the water growing deeper, they disappeared.

"Well," said Chris, "we know all we want to know now.—There are rattlers about, and if it wasn't for them it wouldn't be a bad place for a long halt."

"We can take care to avoid the snakes," said the doctor, "and as there is plenty of good water we'll stay here till the morning; but as we are in such good time two or three of us will ride on to see what the country's like further on. Perhaps the next plantation may have some one to give us a little information."

Camp was formed then as far as was necessary, the fairly-well-built house offering plenty of shelter, and the place round ample grazing-ground for the beasts.

A hasty meal was made, and then Wilton and Griggs were appointed scouts, riding off and returning at sundown with the information that the plantation they were on was the farthest to be seen—all beyond was wilderness, but with nothing in the shape of high ground beyond, save in one spot where a hill or two rose faintly blue against the sky.

"Isn't it jolly!" said Ned, after they had partaken of an exceedingly muddy meal, the water being fetched from the lagoon, and the fire for boiling their coffee having been made of wood that was indisposed to burn, while no matter where they arranged the provisions it was only to have them attacked by insects, which came from under planks or stones, dropped from the rough ceiling of the decaying shanty, came flying, crawling, hopping, or with sharp raps as if they had formed part of the charge of a gun.

But it was a change. Everything was fresh, and this first start had ended the monotonous drudgery of their unsatisfactory life at the plantation.

So Ned had given his opinion that it was jolly, an idea which, now he had shaken off the feeling of depression at leaving what had for years been his home, Chris fully shared.

For the boys' spirits had risen as they rode through the bright sunny day, and they only found disappointment in one thing—the fact of being compelled to regulate the pace of their mustangs by that of the heavily-laden mules, whose rate of progress was about equal to that of an ordinary British donkey driven in from a common.

Over and over again they longed to give their sturdy, well-chosen little nags a touch with the heel to send them racing along through the dusty-looking sage-brush; but they had to be contented with plodding steadily along behind the train, save when Chris found that there was something he wanted to ask Griggs, who kept on by the leading mule and its bell, and then the question seemed to be so important and weighty that it took two boys to carry it.

The first few times the doctor had taken no notice, but after Chris had cantered forward four times to rein up on one side of the American, with Ned on the other, his father said dryly when he overtook him,—

"There's a good old saying that has to do with thoughtfulness, Chris. It is this: Let your head save your heels. To apply it in this case, it should be, Save your pony's heels."

"I don't understand you, father," said the boy.

"Don't you? I only meant, the next time you want to ask about something that has been left behind, keep it in your head till you think of the next thing, and the next. You might collect half-a-dozen, and then you could go and ask them altogether. Do you see?"

"Yes, father," said Chris, who turned rather red.

"Be patient, my boy, and you'll have plenty of hard riding, perhaps more than you anticipate."

There seemed to be no necessity for the precaution so near home, but the doctor said that they had better begin as they would have to go on "when in the enemy's country," as he put it, with a smile.

"Before long we may be where there will be risk of our animals stampeding, or being stolen. Later on, when we are in the Indians' country, we shall have to guard against attack, so we will divide the night into watches."

This was before settling down for the night in and about the deserted fruit-farm.

"Oh," cried Wilton; "but surely this is being too particular. Every one is tired. We have had a very wearing day, beginning so early as we did with the packing and getting off."

"Yes," said the doctor coldly, "but the success or failure of the expedition depends upon our being punctilious. A stitch in time saves nine, my dear boy."

"But——" began Wilton, in a tone of protest.

"One moment," said the doctor. "Let me make a suggestion. We want to start early every morning for Unknownia, if you will let me coin a name for the place of our search."

"Of course," said Bourne.

"We must always break the neck of our journey by getting over a good many miles before the heat of the day sets in."

"That's good advice," cried Griggs.

"Very well, then," continued the doctor; "we don't want to waste time in lighting fires and hunting up horses

and mules that have strayed no one knows where in the course of the night, do we?"

"No, of course not. I see," said Wilton. "I give in."

"The man who takes the morning watch will have breakfast ready before daybreak, and then there will be nothing to do but load up the mules and start off the moment it is light enough."

There were no dissenters from the leader's practical proposals, and he elected to take the first half of the night's watch himself, Griggs to take the second, and soon afterwards the animals were hobbled and left to graze, one of the barn-like buildings was chosen for resting-place, and those who were free from duty lay down to sleep. The two boys naturally enough made up their bed of dry sage-brush on the decaying floor of the building, and then, in response to the doctor's orders to get off to sleep at once so as to be well rested and fresh for the next day's work, they lay wide awake, talking in whispers.

To do them justice, this was no fault of theirs. They were tired enough, but their eyelids felt as if they were furnished with springs which held them wide open, to stare through the open side of the barn at the glittering stars, while their ears were all on the strain to listen to the different sounds that came from all around.

At first there was the cropping of the horses and mules, as they feasted on the fresh shoots of the abundant growth, owing to the moisture beneath the little dry river-bed having kept the coarse grasses pretty succulent. There was the hum of mosquitoes and the boom of big beetles, and every now and then the cry and answering cry of some animal unknown from out in the sage-brush. But for a time the lads lay silent, till a peculiar mournful shout, as it seemed to be, came from the direction of the lagoon, sounding so mournful and human that it was too much for Ned, who whispered—

"Awake, Chris?"

"Of course. Who's to go to sleep with millions of things getting up your legs and arms and down your neck? I wish I'd taken off my clothes. Isn't it hot!"

"Yes, yes ; but did you hear that ?"

"Yes."

"What was it ?"

"Owl," said Chris shortly.

"I know it was a howl," said Ned, "but it was more like a shout or hail."

"Owl, owl, hunting about over the brush for young hares or rats and mice."

"Oh, of course. I never thought of that," said Ned, and he settled down quietly for a few minutes, before saying in a whisper: "I say, isn't it queer that one seems to hear hundreds of things now that one never noticed at home ?"

"I don't know. Perhaps we should have heard some of these ticks and squeaks and rustlings if we had lain awake. I say, Ned, I believe all the wild things from round about are coming to see what we want here."

"Very likely. What's that ?"

"What ?"

"That flash of light. Is it a storm coming ?"

"Pooh ! No. Father threw some bits of dry stuff on the fire."

"To be sure. But I say, Chris, that's why all these insects and things come creeping up. It's the light that attracts them."

"Of course it is. I wish you'd go to sleep."

"I will as soon as I can, but you needn't be so disagreeable."

"Enough to make me. I'm tired, and you keep on talking like an old woman. Not frightened, are you ?"

"Nonsense ! No. Ugh !"

Ned started up, his action following the ejaculation belying his words, for all of a sudden from near at hand came a dull thud as if a heavy blow had been struck, followed by what sounded in Ned's ears like a shriek of agony

"What's that ?" he gasped.

"One mule tried to bite another in the back, had a

kick for his pains, and called 'Murder!' in mulese," said Chris sourly. "I say, I shall have a bed-room to myself to-morrow night if you're going on like this."

Ned was silent, for his companion's words rankled.

"Perhaps I ought to have known," he said, "but it's all so strange lying out here in the darkness."

He turned over on the other side, determined to sleep now, and he tried hard for quite a quarter of an hour, the effort seeming to make him more wakeful than ever, for his senses were all upon the strain, while as the night progressed fresh noises, some of them quite peculiar, seemed to arise. Once he started, for there was a heavy splash which in the clear air sounded quite near, but which was evidently from the lagoon; and it put to flight an idea he had been nursing up of going down to the sheet of water and ridding himself of his hot tickling clothes so as to have a good swim before breakfast. That was all over now, for that splash told of alligators swimming in the lagoon to his heated imagination. He had never heard of the reptiles existing in that part of the country, but he knew that there were plenty in the swamps farther to the south, and there was no reason why there might not be some in the wild districts into which they were plunging.

Another splashing noise succeeded, and he felt that it might have been made by a fish, and others which succeeded have been caused by waterfowl. But all idea of bathing was dismissed.

At last, after a long hot lapse of time, during which he had given many a vicious rub to the unclothed parts of his body, and turned again, feeling as if there were far too many buttons on his clothes, which instead of confining themselves to their proper duty of holding the said garments in their places, felt as if they had become animate and were engaged in treating his flesh as if it was wax and they were seals.

"Hah!" he sighed, at last, as the sounds grew apparently more dull and distant, Chris's breathing heavy and regular, and a feeling of restful ease began to pervade his being.

"Old Chris is fast asleep, and I'm going off at last. Oh, how tired, how sleepy I do—— Ugh!"

He did not rub now, he dared not, and that ejaculation was like a husky sigh—very low; but it was loud enough to rouse Chris into wakefulness.

"What's the matter?" he whispered.

There was no reply for a few moments, and Chris repeated the question, adding, "Did you speak?"

"I must have been dropping off and dreamed it," thought Chris, but the next moment his name was uttered in a strange whisper.

"Yes? All right! What is it?"

"There's something on me," came back faintly.

"Well, knock it off."

"I daren't. I can't move."

"What, is it so heavy?" said Chris mockingly.

"N—no. I'm afraid it'll bite."

"A skeeter?"

"No," said Ned, more faintly. "Call to your father for help."

"What for? Here, shall I strike a light?"

"N—no. It might make it angry."

"It? It?" said Chris, with all the petulance of one who had been previously disturbed by his bed-fellow's alarms.

"What is *it*?"

"Down by the pool—the hot sand—you know—amongst the stones."

"What! A snake?" whispered Chris, alarmed in turn now, and feeling the cold perspiration breaking out on his temples.

"Yes—a rattler."

"Look here, you boys," said a stern voice, in a whisper from close at hand, "I begged you to——"

"A light, father! Be careful!" gasped Chris, and the next moment there was a sharp scratching sound, a flash, and a pale light played over the recumbent figures.

"Now then, what is it?"

"Oh, it's gone now," groaned Ned. "I felt it glide off when you struck the match, sir."

"Leap off, you mean," said the doctor. "Rats don't glide."

"Oh, it wasn't a rat, sir," said the boy faintly. "It was a rattler."

"Nonsense! Not here."

"Yes, sir; they swarm. Chris and I saw a big one down in the river-bed this afternoon."

"Pooh!" cried the doctor. "But this is your bed, not the river's. It is not likely that one would be here. If there were any about, they'd be a deal more likely to favour me by the fire. You've been dreaming, my boy."

"Oh no, sir. It was too horribly real."

"Real enough, but some little animal—a mouse, more likely," said the doctor, putting out the second match he had lit most carefully. "Look here, have you boys got matches?"

"Yes, father."

"Be careful how you use them, then. This place is as dry as tinder. Now then, go to sleep."

He backed out of the place, and the boys lay listening to the rustle and crackle of his departing steps.

"Think it was—not a snake, Chris?" said Ned, at last.

"Yes. If it had been a rattler father wouldn't have gone off like that. You didn't feel it crawl, did you?"

"Yes, right up in my chest, and I bore it till I felt it touch my neck, and then—— Oh, it was a horrid sensation!"

"Yes," said Chris slowly, "a horrid sensation, but it wasn't a rattler. I say, think you can go to sleep now?"

"I'm going to try. But, I say, I never thought that sleeping out in the wilds——"

"We haven't got to the wilds yet," said Chris.

"No, no; but this is bad enough."

"Pooh! We shall get used to it, and think nothing of sleeping anywhere. I say, I was asleep, and you woke me out of a beautiful dream—such a lovely one."

"Did I?" said Ned, rather uneasily. "What was it?"

"I dreamed that we had found the place just as it is on the map, and you couldn't put your foot down anywhere

without treading upon gold; and then your rattlesnake came and spoiled it. Here, I'm going to sleep again to finish that dream. Can't you go now?"

"I'll try," said Ned, who felt horribly ashamed about his false alarm.

But it took no trying. Five minutes later both boys were sleeping soundly after this initiation in what they would have to encounter during their wild journey.





CHAPTER X

ON THE WAY

NED was ready to laugh at his scare when riding forward in the sunshine of a brilliant morning. He had been awakened by Griggs with a cheery hail, to find the cool damp air of morning impregnated with the agreeable odour of coffee fuming away over the embers of a crackling fire which showed up the browsing animals here and there in the darkness. Then came a hearty breakfast, over which the day's proceedings were discussed, and the doctor's decision accepted that they could not do better than strike right away in the direction of the hill seen the previous afternoon, making that their observatory for deciding future proceedings.

"Our plan of campaign is simple enough," he said; "we must avoid all traces of civilization, and keep to the wilds. The rest lies with chance and good fortune."

It was only beginning to get light when all set to loading up the mules, to find it nearly as hard a task as before; but it was mastered, a sharp look-out given round to make sure that nothing was left behind, and then the order was given, "Forward!" Griggs led off once more, with the biting mule's bell jingling, and the low brush, wet with dew, giving out a peculiar rustling as it was trampled down or passed through, the direction of the hill being

determined by compass, the result of their leader's observation taken the day before.

But soon after the darkness grew grey, there was a faint band visible in the heavens which gradually broadened, trees started into view to right and left, and after progressing some distance in silence, Chris and Ned, who had taken up their positions on starting right and left of Griggs, began to find their tongues and make remarks about the faint streaks of orange colour which lit up the zenith. Soon after it was as if the coming light of day was illumining them as well as the landscape, and they ended by asking questions and then talking loudly about what had passed in the night.

Griggs was ready enough to reply in a bantering, boyish spirit in response to one of Chris's questions.

"Yes," he said; "your dad roused me up out of about the most delicious sleep I ever remember to have had. Oh, it's just grand sleeping out in the open. You have so much room to breathe."

"Why, you slept in the house place the same as we did," cried Ned. "I saw where you lay down."

"Likely enough, but you didn't see me get up again. It was too hot and stuffy in there, with things creeping into your hair and ears. I soon got up and shook them off so as to go and pick a place near where the doctor was watching, so that he should know where to find me. Then I lay down on one of nature's own spring mattresses, made by spreading a blanket over the sage-brush, and the next minute I was asleep."

"But suppose there had been a rattler under where you lay down?" cried Ned.

"Well, then he'd have just had time to take one bite at the blanket and fill his teeth full of wool before I'd squeezed him flat. I weigh nigh upon twelve stone, horse-man's weight, and that would have taken all the music out of his tail if he'd been there. But don't you make any mistake about those gentlemen; they've an ugly way of biting if they're obliged, but from what I know, the first thing a rattler does when he hears feet coming is to take

himself away somewhere so that no one shall tread on his music."

It was then that Chris annoyed his companion by relating the night alarm, though Ned was ready enough to join in the laugh against himself.

"Say," said Griggs suddenly, as they passed a clump of trees standing like an island upon a little elevation above the monotonous plain which had succeeded the oasis where the fruit-farm lay in the solitude, and he pointed off to his left.

"Say what? Can you see anything?" asked Chris.

"Yes; ain't that the hill we've got to make 'smorning?"

"Yes; of course," cried Chris, shading his eyes from the level sunbeams.

"Then we're leaving it too much to the left."

The opinion was endorsed before anything had been done, by an order from their leader, who had been using his glass, and now shouted from the rear that they should bear off to the left and then make straight for the elevation dimly seen like a low cloud in their front.

"Our boss is going to keep us all up to the mark, and no mistake," said Griggs, "only I hope he's going to play fair with us."

"Why, of course he will," cried Chris indignantly.

"I don't know," said the American, with a curious smile about the corners of his lips and a twinkle in his eye. "I don't think he was quite square in the night."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, he had to rouse me up to relieve him about midnight, when I was in such a beautiful sleep that it was a sin to break it, and what does he do but snap it in two about an hour before he ought."

"I don't believe he would," cried Chris.

"No, you don't, because he's your father. He ain't my father, and so I believe he did."

"But did you look at your watch?"

"Nay, but I felt as if his must have been an hour too fast if he looked at it and found it twelve o'clock. Say, we might as well let watches take their chance now, and trust

to the sun. He don't want any winding up, and we shall have plenty to do without seeing to keys and that sort of thing."

"I shall keep mine wound up," said Chris decisively.

"So shall I," cried Ned. "We don't want to turn savages because we are going into the wilds."

"Just as you like, squires, but you'll do more good, I say, by being sure to wind up your revolvers and setting your rifles ready to strike one or two when they're wanted. I say, we must talk to the boss about having some shooting if we see a chance."

"There's one then for the shot-barrel," cried Chris excitedly, as he pointed to a hare—a jack rabbit, as they called it—just startled by their animals' feet, and bounding away as hard as he could go.

"Nay, we're not going to waste powder and shot upon those things. I don't like that bitter sort of meat."

"They are bitter," observed Ned. "My father says it's because they eat so many of the artemisia shoots."

"Eh? What shoots?" cried Griggs.

"Artemisia—this stuff we're riding through."

"Oh, the sage-brush! Well, p'r'aps it is, but I allus thought it was from swallowing so much alkali dust. Regular soda plain, this."

"What are we likely to find farther on, Griggs?" said Chris, after that gentleman had been remonstrating a little with the bell mule for trying to bite Ned's mustang, the said remonstrating being performed with the butt of his rifle, which had to be applied hard upon the vicious animal's head.

"What are we likely to find to shoot?" replied Griggs, with a satisfied grunt, for the mule was plodding steadily on again. "Well, Indians."

"But we can't eat them," cried Chris, laughing.

"No, my lad; I should say buck Indian would be as tough as his own teepee.¹ Matter o' taste, though, I s'pose. No cannibal that I ever heard of in our family."

¹ Skin lodge, hut, or tent.

"No nonsense, Griggs," said Ned. "What are we really likely to find?"

"The gold if we're lucky," said the American dryly.

"I mean, what are we likely to shoot for the pot?"

"All depends how far south we get, and whether we come into woods and mountains. If we strike them we may drop upon a flock of gobblers now and then."

"What! Turkeys?"

"Yes."

"Splendid!" cried the boys in a breath. "But do you really think we shall find them?"

"Like enough; if we're far enough away from settlements and Indians."

"But if we don't find turkeys, what then?" asked Chris.

"I dunno. We're going into the wildest parts we can find, places that haven't been hunted over. We might come upon buffalo or a deer now and then. All depends upon our getting into quite lonely spots. But there you are," continued the speaker, pointing with his piece, and then administering another punch to the mule, who was beginning to smile previous to making a bite.

"What are you pointing at?" asked Ned.

"Can't you see those birds skimming along just over the brush, my lads?"

"No," said Ned.

"Yes," cried Chris. "I see them—partridges."

"Something of that kind. Prairie hens, or cocks. They're good to eat sometimes."

"Of course; we've often had them."

"Here, I must cut a good thick cudgel first chance on purpose for this lovely playful insect here. We ought to christen him Mosquito. He's always trying for a bite out of something—hungry beggar. I say, dessay he wouldn't mind trying a bit of Indian."

"Give him another punch with your rifle."

"No!" cried Griggs emphatically. "Never again. I did that idiotic thing twice over before I thought what a fool I was towards myself, and teaching you two lads at the same time."

"How? What do you mean?"

"Doing what is sure to mean an accident some day. Can't you see, one holds by the barrel and reaches down the butt?"

"Of course."

"Well, some day that means jarring the rifle off and sending its charge into you who hold the barrel. Never try such a thing, whatever you do. It's the work of an idiot, my lads. A man that does such a thing oughtn't to be trusted with a gun."

"Then we ought to take Mr. Nathaniel Griggs' rifle away from him, Ned," said Chris, with mock seriousness.

"Ah, you may laugh, my lads, but I deserve it," said the American seriously. "It gave me a cold shudder just now when I thought of what a mad thing I had done. There's more fooling about with guns than people think. Every now and then a donkey comes into a room, sees a gun, picks it up, and presents it, saying to some one, 'I'll shoot you,' and pulls the trigger, bringing some poor fellow down. If ever you see any one aim at a person with a gun, knock him over, and save accident. A poor boy or girl is shot, and then the idiot says, 'Oh, I didn't know it was loaded!' It oughtn't to have been, but at such times guns generally are. I don't know how many accidents of that kind I've heard of. We're always going to be carrying our pieces on this journey, and never ought to have one out of our hands, so we should be the more careful. I don't want to be buried out here in the desert, nor yet go home again without a head. What would be the use of the gold to me then?" he added, with a dry chuckle.

"Ah, what indeed?" said Chris seriously. "But don't talk about it. I say, when you were keeping watch in the night, did you hear or see anything?"

"Didn't see much, but I seemed to hear a good deal that was a bit strange."

"What?" asked Chris eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know; creepy sounds in the black darkness under the trees, and splashings in the big pool, just as if it

was full of six-foot alligators waiting for something or some one to eat."

"I heard that," said Chris; "but it was only fish."

"Like enough, my lad. I never heard of any 'gators in these parts. Hallo! That was something.—Nearly had me off."

"A snake!" cried Chris, for Griggs' mustang had suddenly plunged, bounding sidewise with a jerk to its rider which nearly sent him out of his saddle.

"Rattler, I expect; nearly trod on him. Isn't bitten, or he wouldn't go on so quietly," added the American, turning in his saddle to look back at the trampled track they had made through the brush, but nothing was to be seen.

"Oughtn't we to ride back and warn the others?" said Chris.

"No need, my lad; that gentleman, if he was a rattler, has gone to earth fast enough, and won't show himself till we're gone. Yes, I don't think my nag was touched. I shouldn't like that. Deal rather Master Skeeter here got it. A bite would make him smile and look more handsome than he does now."





CHAPTER XI

NED SEES SOMETHING

“**N**O luck yet, Griggs,” said the doctor, riding up to the head of the little caravan one morning, after many, many days of travel since the party made its first plunge into the unknown, untraversed wilds, to keep trudging on at the rate dictated by the mules, which, laden as they were, could not be hurried. Sometimes when the track they made for themselves was easy and level a good many miles were got over; at others the hindrances seemed to multiply, and Griggs laughingly said it never rained but it poured, and then the tale of miles traversed became very few at the end of the day.

But the American worked harder than any one, and always with unfailing good-humour. There were times when he seemed to be furious, raging out in language especially his own, the vocabulary being wonderful, the names he called astounding in their fluency, novelty, and peculiarity; still the objects of these displays of temper were never his fellow-travellers, but the mules, and as soon as he had roared himself hoarse he stood wiping his perspiring face, smiling contentedly, to say to one, the other, or both of the boys, “I feel a deal better for having got rid of all that nasty stuff. It kinder eases my mind, youngsters, and now look at ’em,” he continued, pointing at his obstinate charges; “see how nicely they go. Don’t you ever tell

me that mules have no brains. Look at Skeeter, how he's listening to my voice, and you wait a moment and you'll see him begin working those ears of his about. There, do you see? That's his way of telegraphing his opinions about what he has heard to all the rest. There's a deal more in mules than people think."

Be this right or wrong, the baggage-carrying animals did their best when Griggs was near them, and a few absurd words from his powerful lungs stopped kicking, biting, and squealing when a revolution seemed to be on the way, and a fight of heels had begun, to the imminent risk of disaster to the packs.

"No luck yet, sir?" cried Griggs, when the doctor had spoken on that particular morning. "Why, I was just thinking how lucky we had been."

"How?" said the doctor, and the boys pricked up their ears to listen to the conversation.

"Haven't lost a mule; always got over some of the ground to bring us nearer to the place we're looking for; and the way in which we are enjoying ourselves in this compound frolic of a picnic is wonderful."

"Enjoying, eh? Well, I'm glad you take it so."

"Oh, I think we're been wonderfully lucky, seeing what might have happened."

"Do you hear, boys?" said the doctor. "That's the spirit to take our journey in. But look here, Griggs, we've been trenching too much on our stores, and that's bad."

"The mules don't think so, sir," said the American, laughing; "but as we can't buy fresh, going on in this way, perhaps we had better be on the look-out a little more for the pot, and leave the stores as much alone as we can."

"Yes," said the doctor. "I say, don't let anything eatable go by. By the way, you're deviating a little from the course we laid down this morning."

"Just a little, sir," replied Griggs. "It was Skeeter's doing."

"Oh, I did not know that the mule took the lead."

"He doesn't always, sir, but sometimes he stops short, lifts up that muzzle of his, lays his ears flat down, and sings one of those pleasant little airs of his; and when he does that I've noticed more than once that it means he smells water somewhere. So this time when he snapped at a fly trying to lay eggs in his skin, and bore off a little to the left, I didn't interfere."

"But the look-out forward does not seem promising," said the doctor, raising his double glass to his eyes and sweeping the horizon.

"No, sir, it looks like warm stuff out of the kegs to-night, and none to spare for a wash."

"I'm afraid so," said the doctor, closing his glass and drawing rein so as to let Wilton and Bourne close up. "Tired, Chris—Ned?"

"Oh no," they replied. "It's soon in the day yet, father," added Chris.

"That seems a pity about the water, Griggs," said Ned, as they rose slowly on. "Oh how I should like a good swim in a clear river!"

"Wouldn't be amiss; but when you can't get beef, mutton ain't bad."

"I knew that," said Chris dryly.

"But you don't seem to know that when you can't get plenty of water for bathing, nice clean sand isn't a bad thing for a good dry wash. It's better without soap too."

Chris laughed.

"Ah, you may grin, but it's a nasty habit, I think, that of rubbing grease turned into what you call soap all over your skin. Look yonder on that patch of sand," he continued, pointing, for his keen eyes seemed to miss nothing.

"Snakes!" cried Chris, bringing his rifle sharply round.

"Nay, nay, don't shoot. What's the good? You might scare something better."

"Better!" said Ned, with his upper lip curling up and the corners of his mouth going down.

"Yes; I don't care about snake," said the American dryly, "but I hev heard that some of the Injuns cut the

rattlers' heads off and roast them in wood ashes, and that they're uncommonly good."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Ned.

"Yes, that's just how I feel, my lad," continued Griggs, in his calm, dry manner. "I'm like that countryman of mine who was hard up for tuck, out in the backwoods, and when some one asked him afterwards how he managed to live, he said he shot and cooked the crows."

"Horrid!" cried Ned.

"Yes, that's what t'other one said; and then he says, 'But surely you don't like crows?' 'No,' says the first one, 'I don't kind o' hanker arter them.' It's the same here, I don't kind o' hanker arter snake; but it's all a matter o' habit."

"Oh, ugh!" cried Ned.

"Ah, you may say ugh, but it all depends; when a fellow's hungry he's got to eat something, and I don't see why a snake shouldn't be as good to eat as an eel."

"But they're poisonous," cried Chris.

"Only in the head, and it's easy to cut that off. Now, look yonder; there lie four fine fat rattlers, fast asleep on that patch of sand. We're not exactly short of food, but a little extra would be very useful, and as rattlers are so plentiful it seems almost a pity that we can't make them good to eat, and knock over all we come across."

"How can you talk in that horrid way, Griggs!" cried Chris, with a shudder.

"I don't see nothing horrid about it. Snake's a nice clean enough sort of thing; and, as I say, it's all a matter of habit. They tell me frogs are delicious, but I'd as soon eat snake."

"Reptiles! Ugh!" cried Ned.

"So's turtle reptile," said Griggs. "Nasty-looking thing too. Might just as well eat alligator. I've a good mind to get down and cripple two or three of those rattlers, so as to try how they eat."

"No, no, don't!" cried the boys in a breath, and before the others grasped what he was about to do, Chris pulled up, slipped off his mustang, gathered up a handful of

small stones, and sent a shower amongst the sleeping reptiles.

In an instant there was a scattering of sand and a rush for safety, the snakes taking refuge amongst the brush around, leaving not a sign of their presence.

"There goes dinner for six," said Griggs dryly. "I say, there's plenty of those creeping gentry about here."

"Almost the only inhabitants," said Chris.

"Well, if we do have to come to eat 'em, perhaps we shall get monuments set up to us in our honour for introducing a new kind of useful food of which there's plenty being wasted in the far west. Pity they're so small. They'd shrink too in the cooking. Why, a hungry man would be able to polish off one easy."

"Do you want to make me ill, Griggs?" said Ned, shuddering.

"Certainly not, my lad."

"But I say, Griggs," cried Chris, "how big do those things grow—how long were the largest you ever saw?"

"Oh, they don't come quite up to boa constrictors. Let me see, the largest I ever saw measured was——"

"Twenty-five feet?"

"Nay, nay, nay, not quite as long as that, but quite six feet, which is bigger than I like, after all. Most of 'em's little, like those. Dangerous sort of things, and don't the horses and mules understand! Don't catch them going near a rattler if they know it."

"My nag has shied four times this morning at the poisonous brutes," said Chris.

"Seems to me," said Griggs, "that they like this part of the country. I'd be pretty careful about walking about when we get down. It'd be as well to ride about a bit when we stop for camping, so as to scare the beggars away. We don't want to get bitten."

But from that time, oddly enough, they saw no sign or trace of the reptiles. The sun grew hotter and hotter, but neither in sandy level nor rugged stony patch was a snake seen basking. Nothing was visible but lizards, and they

disappeared when the doctor called a halt in the most rugged part of a stony waste where there was an overhanging cliff and a broken gully which promised at a distance to be the home of a spring; but though it had evidently been at one time a pool overhung by rocks, there was not a trace of moisture. It afforded a little shelter, however, in an overhanging part where there was a rugged projecting shelf, and there being nothing better, the halt was made there, only to prove too hot a one for endurance, the rocks seeming to glow, and keeping off such air as was astir as well as the sun; so after a short time the doctor decided to go on once more in search of some more likely place.

In those hot, weary hours the elasticity and cheerfulness of the boys died away. In the early morning it had been all laugh and chat and notice of everything they passed that seemed novel, but with the coming of noon quite a change came over them, and Ned took to sighing from time to time, then to murmuring, and at last after a long, low expiration of the breath—

“Oh dear,” he cried, “I am getting so tired of this!”

“Well, you are a fellow!” grumbled Chris. “Only an hour or two ago you talked as if you liked it.”

“Ah, I wasn’t so hot and fagged out then. It gets so jolly monotonous. Here we go on, ride and tramp, ride and tramp, day after day, seeing nothing but sand and sage-brush, sand and sage-brush. Always tired, always being scorched by the sun till one’s giddy, and——”

“Here, father!” cried Chris, but without turning his head.

“What are you going to do?” said Ned, in a hurried whisper.

“Call father up, for you to grumble to him.”

“Nonsense!” whispered Ned. “Don’t be a stupid donkey. Can’t I say a word or two without you wanting to tell tales?”

“I don’t want to tell tales; I want for you to tell father yourself. You talked as if you had had enough of it, and wanted to go back.”

“Who wants to go back?” cried Ned angrily. “Nice

thing if one can't say what one likes about one's feelings! I only said what I did because I was hot and tired, and it is so tiresome, one day just like another, and not a bit of adventure to go through. Why, I expected no end of fun in that way—I mean, no end of excitement."

"Do you understand what he means, Griggs?" said Chris. "I think you've upset him by talking about cooking and eating snake."

"It wasn't that," said Griggs. "He must have got out of bed the wrong way this morning."

"Yes; a nice sort of bed! Nothing but rough sagebrush, crumbling up as soon as it's moved, and looking like so much gritty imitation tea."

"Same sort of bed as we had, squire, and we don't grumble. Why, you're not half a fellow. Like to go back perhaps?"

"That I shouldn't!" snapped out Ned, so suddenly that his mustang started and had to be checked and soothed. "Can't a fellow speak? I don't want to grumble, but it is so monotonous."

"You said that before," cried Chris banteringly.

"I know, Clevershakes!" retorted Ned. "And now I say it again. I've as good a right to speak as you have. If you don't like the word monotonous, I'll say dull and stupid. It's ride and walk, ride and walk."

"And walk and ride, walk and ride," said Chris, imitating his old companion's words and tones. "No adventures—nothing to see."

"Not even a rattlesnake," said Griggs softly.

"Look here, Mr. Griggs," snapped out Ned, "I wish you wouldn't keep interrupting me when I'm speaking. It's precious rude."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Griggs politely.

"Well, don't do it again," said Ned shortly.—"Phew! How hot it is! I'm sure it's ever so much hotter than it has been before."

"Much," said Chris, with his eyes twinkling, but he looked straight before him. So did Griggs, and Ned went on—

"It's just as if the sand got to be red-hot and all the heat was reflected back in one's face. I wouldn't care, though, only it's so dull and monot—dreary!" the boy snapped out, looking sharply from one to the other as if to see whether another remark was about to be made respecting his repetition; but neither of his companions moved a muscle of his face, and he went on murmuring in the same irritable way—

"There seem to be no fish to catch, no birds to shoot. I wouldn't have believed that there could have been so much miserable desert if I hadn't seen it. I quite thought that by this time, after getting right away from all settlements and into the wildest of the wild country——"

"What!" said Griggs sharply. "Oh, nonsense! Wildest of the wild? Why, this is nothing to what we've got to come. We haven't seen a regular good mountain yet."

"No, nor yet a wild beast. I thought we should have had plenty of adventures with them by now."

"Oh, that's what you mean, is it?" cried Griggs, with mock seriousness, giving Chris a peculiar look at the same time, as if asking him to back up any assertions that he might make. "You expected that we would spend half our time shooting lions and stalking tigers?"

"Yes," said Ned, passing his hand over his eyes and shaking his head, as if the heat had made him sleepy and giddy. "*No, no!*" he added hastily. "Of course I know that there are no lions and tigers here. You're laughing at me."

"Well, it's enough to make a cat laugh to hear you go on finding fault, when here we are in a regular wonderful country, such as I should never have expected to find so soon. Of course I know that it wouldn't do for a plantation, but here we are, just at the beginning of rising ground, and a mile or two further we shall be all amongst rocks and stones, and, for all we can tell, we shall come upon the sugar up yonder among those mountains rising up as if they were growing out of what was a plain."

"Sugar? What sugar?" said Ned, staring.

"Well, the gold amongst the three sugar-loaf mountains shown on the chart."

"I only wish we could find it," said Chris.

"Well, have patience, and the more patience you use up the more you'll want. We shan't find the gold without."

"But I'm like Ned," said Chris thoughtfully; "I think as he does, that it does seem wonderful that there should be such a lot of regularly useless land in the world. Look at this: as far as we can see it's so salt and dry that nothing will grow. Stones and sand, and sand and stones, and all of no use at all."

"Who says so?" said Griggs coolly.

"Why, I do; you heard me."

"Yes, you say so, but what do you know about it? You say it's of no use because it's of no use to you; but you know nothing at all about what may be underneath all this sand and stone."

"Nothing at all; not even water," cried Chris.

"You don't know. There may be gold or silver or lead, tin or copper, or some of those minerals that chemists and such folk use. I don't like to hear you grumble, my lad, about things when you've only just looked and not tried. What about precious stones—diamonds and rubies?"

"Or pearls perhaps," said Ned, with a sneer.

"Yes, or pearls," said Griggs, and the boys both burst out laughing heartily.

Ned's tide of ill-humour had turned.

"Got me?" said Griggs gravely. "I say, you are clever ones!"

"Well, I like to hear you make a blunder sometimes, Griggs. You often have the laugh at us; now we've got one at you."

"Yes, you are clever ones," said the American grimly, "but you're wrong this time. You're both grinning and looking at one another as much as to say, Hark at old Griggs! He's forgotten that pearls come out of oysters and oysters live in the sea."

"Of course," cried the boys together.

"Yes, of course, and I don't know that there mayn't be fossil oyster shells somewhere about here with pearls still in them. I've seen shells sometimes looking quite pearly inside though they've been buried in rock no end of time. You didn't hear your father say only day before yesterday that all this salt desert land must at one time have been the bottom of the sea. What do you say to that?"

"Oh!" said Chris thoughtfully, and Ned pushed his broad-leaved hat a little on one side so as to scratch his ear.

"You're right, though, after all, about lions and tigers, and so was I. Only they're American lions and tigers—pumas and jaguars, and pumas without any manes, and jaguars with spots instead of stripes. Wait a bit, and we shall come upon some of them. Not here, though; it's not likely sort of country for them, but there's mountain land yonder piled up higher than we shall be able to take our mustangs and mules. We shall find water-courses soon, and that means trees and grass and quite a different climate. The sort of place where we're quite likely to find Uncle Ephraim at home."

"What, grizzly bear?" cried Chris excitedly.

"That's the gentleman," replied Griggs; "and as like as not after crossing a ridge or two we may come upon buffalo."

"What, in the mountains?"

"Perhaps. More likely in the plains. There, don't you chaps grumble any more. Your fathers have got quite enough to think about without having to talk to you about being a little more plucky and patient."

"Yes, I know," cried Chris, wincing; "we're only grumbling to you."

"Oh, then I don't matter?"

"Not a bit. You're such a good-tempered, patient chap, and you seem like one of us. But I say, Griggs, do you really think we are going to find a change in the country soon?"

"Certain."

"Oh come, that's better! We have had enough of sand and sage-brush, and we do want a regular change."

"You'll get it, then, and I dare say before night. Can't you see that we're on the slope of the mountains now?"

"No, not a bit of it."

"But we are; just slowly rising, and by night we shall find that we are in quite a different place, hundreds of feet higher than where we had breakfast this morning."

"Well, I hope you're right," said Chris.

No more was said then, the two boys sometimes riding, sometimes walking, till after some hours Griggs pulled up, to point to the fact that they had reached what seemed to be the summit of an enormous land-wave heaved up and rising for miles either way across the desert, but right in front descending slowly into a vast hollow plain which glistened in its desolation as if frosted with silver.

"Why, it must be silver," cried Ned enthusiastically.

"Nay, nay, only salt, my lad. Looks like a dried-up lake."

"Yes; where's your herd of buffaloes?" cried Chris. "Oh, shouldn't I like for us to shoot one and have some beef!"

"Yes; buffalo hump isn't bad," said Griggs. "It's rich and tender and gravyish."

"But where is it?" said Ned.

"Higher up, I suppose, where there's prairie land and grass. You don't expect to see buffler where there's nothing to graze on, do you? Look at the stones, though. Regular rocky ridges rising up one above the other on the other side of that frosty lake part. Shouldn't wonder if we found something fresh there."

He pointed to his left, where there was a manifest change in the scenery as seen through the shimmering haze which hindered the view.

"Yes," he cried eagerly, "if you look hard you can just get a glimpse of a great ridge, and just beyond—*ragh!* There are the mountains at last!"

"I can't see them," said Chris thoughtfully. "Are they near?"

"No; but near enough for us to reach to-morrow night."

"But what about to-night? I say, that isn't salt. I can see it glittering quite plainly; it's water."

"No, my lad; no water there. I wish there was," added Griggs to himself.

"Then what are we to do for water to-night?"

"There'll be enough to make our tea."

"But the horses and mules?" said Chris.

"We must try and find a hollow with some shrubby stuff that they can chew, poor beasts, for they'll get nothing else. What are you pointing at, squire?"

Ned made no answer, but sat fast where he had checked his pony, pointing to where hundreds, perhaps thousands, of heavy grey stones lay scattered widely about over the sandy slope.

"Well, I can see them; stones, looking as if a mountain had crumbled all away in an earthquake, or in some volcanic explosion which had shattered it all to pieces."

"No, no," said Ned huskily; "not there. More to the left. It is that tree I mean."

"Tree? There's no tree there."

"Yes, that great one that was turned over in the earthquake, and all of the trunk and top buried in the stones."

"I say, my lad," said Griggs anxiously, "has the heat been too much for you?"

"Yes, it made my head ache."

"That's it, then. Made you fancy you can see a tree upside down."

"'Tisn't fancy," said Ned huskily. "I can see plain enough, but it isn't natural. It's all alive, and the roots are twisting and twining about as if the tree was alive and in pain."

"Here, don't stare at it. Shut your eyes for a bit, my lad. I'll take your mustang's rein."

"But I must look at it," cried Ned excitedly. "I can't help it. Horrid! Here, you two are not looking the right way."

"I'm looking at you, my lad," said Griggs kindly.

"And so are you, Chris. Don't—please don't. Look there; I want you to see what it means."

"Ugh!" gasped Chris, as he turned his eyes in the direction pointed out by his companion, and that which he saw then was evidently seen now by his nag, which started violently, and but for the tight hand the lad had upon the rein it would have dashed off.

"Here, have you got it too?" cried Griggs. "There, sit still till the water-kegs come up, and you must have a drink a-piece. The sun has been too much for you, and——"

He said no more, but sat staring in one direction with his mouth wide open and his eyes seeming ready to start out of his head.

"Hallo, here! hallo!" cried the doctor, cantering up, closely followed by Wilton and Bourne, leaving their position in the rear unguarded. "What's the matter—the boys taken ill?"

"Snakes," cried Griggs hoarsely. "Look yonder."

Griggs' words were unnecessary, for the doctor's eyes had lighted upon the extraordinary sight that had startled Ned into his wild announcement.

The next moment his companions had grasped the phenomenon, and had hard work to keep their mounts from dashing frantically away.

For about a hundred yards from them, half hidden among the stones, was something which pretty well warranted Ned's comparison to a tree turned wrong way up, so that only its roots were visible above the ground, the object being, in fact, a monstrous knot of hundreds of snakes twined together as if they were all engaged in the attempt to get their heads into the centre of the tangled mass which, all in motion, heaved and sank and rolled from side to side, the lower portions of the serpents' bodies and their tails being free to lash and writhe about in the air, while at a second glance the spectators began to realize the fact that all around, gliding in and out amongst the stones, were hundreds upon hundreds more of the reptiles, apparently urged on by some savage instinct to form other knots, till the whole of the hollow in front seemed to be alive with the loathsome creatures.

"Did you ever see anything like this before, Griggs?" said the doctor, who was the first to speak.

"Never, sir; but an old gold prospector once told me that he had seen just such a sight, only I put it down to being a yarn told to cram me."

"But they're not poisonous—not rattlesnakes, surely?" said Bourne.

"They surely are," cried Wilton. "Hark! Can't you hear? It's like a dull thrilling sound. Here, I don't want to be the first to run, but I can't stand this; I'm off."

"We'd better all be off," cried the doctor. "Here, Griggs, head round your bell-mule and let's get away. You seem to have led us right into the empire of snakes. Quick, look alive, or the poor brutes will be right amongst the reptiles."

"Not they, sir; they smell 'em now. Come and help, or we shall have a stampede."





CHAPTER XII

CHRIS HAS A FIT

EVERY one made a dash to avert the disaster on hearing their leader's words, but the stampede had already begun. Disaster of a serious kind was about to fall upon the little expedition, and but for the energy of Griggs and Chris matters would have been worse than they were.

For panic had seized upon two or three of the mules, which took alarm from the startled mustangs, and directly after they would all have been in headlong flight, kicking wildly as they tore away, when the same thought came to two of the party who had the energy and nerve to put it into action.

The idea was that even then, frightened as they were, the mules would obey their old habit, so driving their heels into their snorting mustangs' sides, Griggs and Chris raced after Skeeter as he was tearing along at full speed, shaking his load loose, and making his bell jangle loudly as he squealed and galloped.

Almost at the same moment the two pursuers grasped the mule's rein on either side and drew their own, with the result that with the bell ringing still loudly, three animals were going along swiftly close abreast, but moment by moment becoming more and more under control, Skeeter the calmest of all, for he acted as if he felt comparatively safe with a stout cob pressing against each side.

The rest of the mules were still galloping, but Skeeter led, and his behaviour began to influence his companions to such an extent that as they grew farther from the object of their alarm the kicking and plunging gradually subsided. The effort of going full speed under loads generally carried at a walk began to tell, and at the end of half-a-mile all were under control and following their bell-bearing leader, till Skeeter was checked, no serpents were in view, and the controllers of the wild race sat panting upon their mustangs, ready to round up any mule which made a fresh start, and every living thing panting from their late exertions, the bipeds eagerly calculating the damage that had been done.

"Sit fast," cried the doctor, "and be ready in case they make a fresh dash. Griggs! Chris! splendid; but keep fast hold of that bell-mule's rein."

"Got him tight, father," cried Chris.

"Same here, doctor," panted Griggs. "He'll have to leave his head behind this time if he tries to make a start. Say, Squire Ned," he continued to the boy, who now joined him, "you were grumbling about having no adventures. What do you say to this for a regular red-hot one, quite noo out of nature's oven?"

"Oh, I don't know," cried Ned excitedly. "Do you think the rattlesnakes will pursue us?"

"No that I don't, my lad; but I say, doctor, just look."

The leader was already gazing back over the ground they had covered, to see that it was dotted with packs and various odds and ends sent flying from the mules' loads, from a tin cross-handled kettle to bags of meal and a great elongated roll which represented the tent.

The doctor groaned, for there lay the scattered objects in sight, while how many lay beyond his ken he was afraid to think.

Of course he felt that they could be collected again, and that they were not of a nature to have suffered much damage, but it would probably be the beginning of another stampede to force any of the animals back along a track infested by serpents, and a task that would try the nerves

of the stoutest of them seeing how horribly insidious was the danger, when the lifting of a bale might mean the incurring of a deadly stroke from a hidden foe.

In all probability no reader of this ever encountered a mule team represented by so many sets of four legs, a head, and tail, and a body hidden by the load secured upon the backs of the owners of the legs by means of cords tied with what a mule-driver calls the diamond hitch. The reader has also probably never seen a mule dissatisfied with the load it has been called upon to bear, and doing its best to shed the same load. Every one is aware of the brute's kicking powers, but in this respect it is at its best when, plunging and flinging out its legs, it squeezes itself up tightly within its skin and tries its best—worst would be the proper term—to shoot itself out through the diamonds of rope which form the hitch.

Griggs had secured most of the loads that day, and he had done well; but all did not stand the strain, and the appearance of the mules standing, hanging of head, stamping, twitching their ears and whisking their tails to get rid of the flies, was painfully ludicrous.

Skeeter, as became him, being leader, and, thanks to the way in which he had been checked, was the most reputable-looking of the team, for others were horrible. Here stood one mule with his load resting upon the sand, the animal striding across it, head and fore-legs in front, hind-legs and tail behind, and nothing upon its back but tightened ropes.

A little farther on was one which had shed its load and stood with drooping head, looking as if it had been ornamented with a tangle of rope.

Again, not many yards away was another snuffling and nuzzling at the sand, which it blew aside now and then with a snort which raised a little cloud—doing all this under difficulties, being nearly overbalanced by its load, which had slipped over till it bulged straight out from its side. Another sat up like a cat, being held in position by its pack, which had slipped over its tail, while again another had kicked till it went down upon its nose, kneel-

ing, so to speak, with its hind-quarters high up, and its load like a pair of panniers resting upon its neck.

"What a horrible confusion!" cried the doctor, and he was going to say something more, but his words were drowned by Skeeter, who had evidently been surveying the wreck of the train and the dismal condition of his companions, especially that of the one farthest off, which had tried to roll its load off till it had been brought up short by getting its legs perpendicular to paw the air—being unable to get over to right or left, consequent upon the two packs thoroughly wedging it up, so that its razor back resembled the hull of a boat whose keel was fitted in the chocks, the pawing legs looking like so many motive masts.

All this seemed to be too much for Skeeter, who stretched out his neck till his muzzle was in a line therewith, literally shed tears, opened his mouth, distended his nostrils, and with ears quivering, emitted the most startling sound ever heard. It was not a neigh like his mother would have given, nor a bray such as his father would have uttered, but a hoarse yell made up of the most discordant elements of both, and it was no wonder that the doctor's voice was drowned.

"Be quiet, you brute!" he cried angrily, making a pretence of kicking it in the pack; and then he stared in wonder, for it seemed as if a fresh misfortune had affected one member of the expedition in a peculiar way. That member was Chris, who suddenly dropped his hold of Skeeter's rein, and with his face horribly distorted, began to roll about in his saddle.

"Oh, Griggs!" he gasped. "Ned! Somebody! Hold me on."

"What is it, boy?" cried the doctor—"Bitten?"

"N—n—n—n—no, father," he panted. And then, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I—I—I—I—I can't help it. I——"

There were other words, but they were confused and

strange; but though they did not convey in words the meaning of the seizure, they pointed out what was the matter. For it became evident that Chris was laughing wildly—madly—hysterically, and to such an extent that he had lost all control of himself, and had hard work to keep in the saddle.

To make matters worse, the mirth proved contagious to such an extent that Griggs sat looking at him, then at the mules, and back again, with his mouth expanding into a broad grin, while Ned slid off his mustang quietly, held on to the rein, and then lay down in the sand, to laugh in the same uncontrolled fashion.

"Well," cried Bourne angrily, "this is a nice way to treat our misfortunes!"

"I—I—I can't help it, father," panted Ned, and he laughed more than ever, while Wilton's lips as he sat looking on began to quiver and then widen out.

"Here, stop it, you two," he growled at last. "Come and help collect the things."

"I—I can't yet," panted Ned, who laughed more than ever, till Wilton gave the doctor and Bourne a sharp look, and then said aloud—

"Oh, let them laugh it out; but I say, are those some of the rattlesnakes coming after us?"

"Eh?" cried Ned, who was sobered in an instant, and sat up to exclaim, "Which way? Whereabouts?"

"I—I—I can't help it if they do come," gurgled out Chris. "Oh, father, plea—please stop me; it hurts. Gi—give me something—a drop of water."

"Yes, the boy's quite hysterical," said the doctor. "Water. Ah! Where are the kegs?"

All looked round, but no kegs were visible. There was the mule that should have borne them, though, with the rough pack-saddle upon which they had been lashed one on each side, twisting its head round and striving to reach a fly that was busy at work depositing its eggs in the animal's coat, the teeth being not long enough to scrape it out.

"Why, the water-kegs have gone!" cried the doctor wildly.

"Here, catch hold of the mule, somebody," cried Griggs, and Chris was sobered in an instant, for the water represented life to all, and it was no time for laughing then.





CHAPTER XIII

IN A STRANGE NEST

CHRIS'S mirth had passed away as quickly as it came, and he sat erect in his saddle.

"Going back to look for the kegs, Griggs?" he said faintly.

"Yes, of course, unless you like the job," was the gruff reply.

"I'll go with you," said Chris briskly.

"Then you'll have to nip your pony's ribs pretty tightly," cried Griggs, "for the moment he sees a snake he'll spin round and bolt."

"I'll mind," said Chris, setting his teeth.

"Come on, then."

The pair rode off back along the track littered with their impedimenta, while the doctor and the others began to try and reduce the loads of the mules in difficulty to something like order.

"Oh dear, what a muddle!" cried Chris, as they went back at an amble. "Why, half the things are lying about."

"Not a quarter," said Griggs gruffly, as his eyes scanned not only the scattered necessities, but every stone and scrap of dry, parched-up growth.

"Think any of the rattlers will be about?" said Chris.

"I dunno. I want to set eyes on those two tubs."

But the tubs were not visible, and the pair rode on till

they felt that at any moment they ought to be in sight of the enemies that put horse and mule to flight.

Still nothing was visible. The last-kicked-off pack had been passed, but there were no tubs, and the part of the desert where the tangled mass of serpents had been seen was so close that the next minute they felt that they were bound to see the writhing creatures somewhere among the stones in front.

But strange to state, their ponies displayed no uneasiness, the tight hands kept upon their reins were not needed, and the docile little animals stepped steadily onward towards the stone-dotted slope and basin.

"Why, where are they?" said Chris, in a whisper, as he gazed wild-eyed and excitedly over his mount's ears and from side to side.

"I dunno, my lad," replied Griggs. "It caps me. Why, there were hundreds and thousands all about yonder when the stampede began."

"Of course there were," said Chris, "and now I can't see one."

"Not so much as a rattler. They must all have holes somewhere here among the stones. Mind! Take care!"

"What for? Why?"

"They may come darting out and attack us."

"I say," continued Griggs, after a careful look round, "weren't dazed with the hot sun and dreamed all that, did we?"

"Did the mules and horses dream it too?" cried Chris scornfully.

"No, of course not. But it's a puzzle, my lad. I wouldn't have believed such a sight possible; but there it was. And now I wouldn't have believed this could have happened; but it has, for I can't see a snake."

"Never mind the snakes as they're not here," said Chris, setting the example of reining up, for the two mustangs to stand calmly enough; "I want to find those two water-barrels."

"Ah, to be sure; we've come for them," said Griggs,

looking curiously about. "I say, was that the mule that carried the kegs?"

"Oh yes; didn't you see the pack-saddle?"

"To be sure. If it hadn't been for that I should have been ready to say that the one with the water had gone right off somewhere."

"Oh, that was the one," persisted Chris. "I know him well enough by his white muzzle."

"To be sure. That's right. Then where are the kegs? Snakes ain't thirsty things. They couldn't have rolled them away, could they?"

"What nonsense!" cried Chris. "But it is really strange. If we were on a slope I should have thought that they had gone rolling right away out of sight."

"We are on a steep slope, lad, but the barrels would have to roll up it to get out of sight like this, and I never knew barrels carry on games like that out of a book of fairy tales."

"Griggs," cried Chris, after a moment or two of thought, "are we in the right place? These stones are very confusing."

"Right place? Yes, look there; you can see our trail."

"Yes," replied Chris thoughtfully, as he bent down over his saddle-bow, "and—— Ugh! Look there!"

"Eh? See snakes?" cried Griggs excitedly.

"No, but look there; surely all those windings in the sand were made by them."

"To be sure. Oh yes, we're in the right spot, without a doubt. Then I tell you what. We can't see very far away any way amongst these dotted-about stones; there must be a sharp slope somewhere near, perhaps the edge of a precipice, or great hole in the ground."

"Crater of a volcano, perhaps," cried Chris.

"That's it, lad; the one that played at pitch-and-toss with all these blocks of stone, and threw them all over the place."

"Then where is the hole?" said Chris.

"I dunno; somewhere about," said Griggs thoughtfully, as he looked about, peering in among the rocks.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Chris, as thoughtfully, "if it is quite close here, and when the mule kicked off the tubs they went rolling down into it and were lost."

"Oh, don't say that, boy!" cried Griggs excitedly. "You don't think of what value that drop of water may be to us now."

"Oh yes, I do. I'm so thirsty; but I say, Griggs, suppose the hole into which they have rolled is the one that the snakes live in."

"Not it; they live in little holes and cracks just big enough for them to creep into. Well, I don't know where the things have gone. Look sharp and find 'em; your eyes are younger than mine. We shall have the doctor after us directly to physic us both for not finding them."

"Hurrah!" cried Chris. "There they are!"

"Where? I can't see from here."

"Come nearer this way," said Chris, easing his horse off to the right. "There, just at the foot of that great block."

"And hurrah the second!" cried Griggs, as soon as he had pressed his horse into the right position. "I couldn't have seen them from where I was even if we had been closer. My word! They rolled a good way, didn't they?"

"No; they couldn't, because they are chained together so that they hung across the pack-saddle. The mule must have galloped round that way when he kicked them off."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Come along; I'll sling 'em across my tit and walk back."

Griggs sprang off his mustang, and was in the act of passing the reins over the animal's head, when Chris made a snatch at his collar and held on.

"What did you do that for?" cried Griggs.

"Hist! Don't make a sound. Look," whispered Chris.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Griggs, lowering his voice, for the boy's manner impressed him, he looked so blank and strange.

"Look! Can't you see?"

"No, not from where I am," was the reply.

"Oh, it's horrid," whispered Chris; "dreadful! The kegs are lying on a nest of snakes, and they're rising and falling and playing about them like flames round logs of wood."





CHAPTER XIV

A FIGHT WITH THE ENEMY

GRIGGS uttered one low whistle as he slipped his arm through the rein so as to leave his hands at liberty, one to press back his cowboy's hat, the other to sweep the gathering drops of perspiration from his brow.

"I never could a-bear snakes," he said huskily.

Then after a pause he drew a long, deep breath, to say with an attempt—a very sorry attempt—at cheerfulness—

"Well, we've found the kegs, anyhow."

"Yes," said Chris bitterly, "and where the snakes are."

"Bless 'em, yes!" said Griggs, looking in the direction of the horrible reptiles. "Well, we don't want them."

"But we want the water."

"Of course."

"What's to be done, Griggs?"

"I can't think o' nothing but say *Sh!* to 'em to frighten them away."

"Oh, don't do that," cried Chris, in alarm. "It might make them attack us."

"It might," said Griggs thoughtfully. "Well, I'm about beat. I've got a tidy bit of pluck in me when I'm stirred up—as much as most men have—but I can't stand rattlers. The idea of getting bitten sends a cold chill all down my back. I'd a deal sooner be hugged by a grizzly.

Poison snakes and mad dogs make a regular coward of me."

"They would of anybody," said Chris. "But I say, what is to be done?"

"Sit down and wait, my lad. I s'pose snakes have some sense in 'em, same as other critters. They're bound to find out before long that they can't break the iron hoops nor bore through the staves to get at the water; and when they're tired perhaps they'll give up and go home."

"But we can't wait. Father will be coming soon to see why we're so long."

"Well, he'll be able to see without our telling him."

"But can't we do something to drive them away?"

"I know what I should do if we were in some places," said Griggs.

"Yes! What?"

"Light a big fire of brushwood and green-stuff that would make a stifling smoke just to wind'ard of them. That would soon scare them off."

"But there's not a handful of stuff that would burn," cried Chris, in despair.

"Nary scrap, my lad."

"Look here; suppose we creep as near as we dare, and then fire off all four barrels of our rifles as closely together as we could, right at them. That would startle them into moving off."

"P'r'aps," said Griggs; "but the thing would be, which way would they go?"

"Which way? Why, from where the smoke and fire came."

"Maybe, but I shouldn't like to risk it. I'm afraid we shall have to wait, my lad—wait till it's dark. Snakes always go back to their holes when the sun sets."

"But that will take so long, and I'm choking with thirst," cried Chris peevishly. "I say, how would it do to keep on pitching great pieces of stone in amongst them, or handfuls of small bits that would scatter and make a noise?"

"Only make 'em savage, I'm afraid. I should have most faith in putting a pound of powder and laying a train ready, so that one could light a bit of touch-tinder and get away to a safe distance. When that went off with a good explosion, I should think the rattlers would scuttle away."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense, Griggs!" cried Chris. "Who's to go and lay the train and place the powder ready?"

"Ah, that would be awkward," said the American thoughtfully.

"Besides, if you had such an explosion you'd burst the barrels."

"Hah! So we should. I say, couldn't lasso the barrels, could we? I can throw a noose pretty well."

"You'd catch serpent as well as the barrels."

"Yes, and that would be nice, to have a savage rattler thrashing and striking about, trying to get his fangs into you somewhere. Say, Chris Lee, lad, we've got in a tangle. Hallo! I thought as much; here's the doctor."

The gentleman in question rode slowly up.

"Well," he said, "have you found the barrels?"

Chris answered him mutely by pointing to the objects of their search.

"Very well," said the doctor. "Why don't you—— Oh, I see, you've just dismounted to sling them across your saddle. We were beginning to think you very long. But I don't see any snakes. Where are they, Chris?"

"Yonder, twining all about the water-kegs, father. It's alive with them."

The doctor shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across at the barrels, his face contracting with horror at the sight which met his eyes.

"No wonder you were so long," he said bitterly. "What do you propose to do?"

"Nothing, father. We can't think of a way," said Chris sadly. "Can you tell us?"

"There seems to be no way save one."

"Wait till the snakes have gone back to their holes, father?"

"Yes, after dark; and then it will not be a pleasant task to get the kegs away. Worse and worse."

"Oh, there can't be anything worse, sir," cried Griggs.

"I think there can, sir," replied the doctor. "This forces us to bivouac, as the soldiers call it, in the serpent-inhabited desert. But we must do it, I suppose. The snakes will not be stirring during the darkness. But we must hope that when we find the gold region, it will not be such a serpent-haunted spot as this; the gold could not have better guardians to keep it safe."

No one spoke for a few minutes, during which the doctor sat upon his horse watching the movements of the serpents.

"That seems to be the only way," he said at last.

"To wait, father?"

"Yes. We had better build up a cairn with some of these stones to guide us to the spot when we come to hunt for it in the dark."

"No need to build a cairn, sir, if I plant three or four stones on the top of that big rock there."

"No; but what about finding it in the dark?"

"Lanthorn will set that right, sir."

"Very well. Up with them, then. Help him, Chris; I'll hold the horses."

The reins were handed to the speaker, and Griggs pointed to a large light-grey piece of lava.

"If you can lift one end of that, squire, to help me, that bit would stand upright on the top of this block. This would do, for it's light-coloured. Can you do it?"

"Oh yes; it's the same sort of stone as this," said Chris, pushing a piece with his foot, "all full of holes, like sponge and cinder."

"Come on, then."

They stooped down one at either end of the fragment, some three feet long and one wide, looking squared like a crystal, and as if Nature had taken the first steps towards providing the builder of a house with a piece to form part of a door-post.

"Yes, it's light enough," said Chris, lifting one end, and

then uttering a cry as he dropped it again, to start back, for there was a sharp hiss, a dull rattling sound—not sharp enough for a rattle—and a large snake glided from beneath, to curl up menacingly, while from the other side a second had appeared, to begin writhing and darting about, striking at random into the air as far as it could reach, while the doctor had hard work to restrain the prancing horses.

Needless to say, Chris and his companion had lost no time in getting beyond reach of the poisonous reptiles, and helping the doctor by each seizing his horse's rein.

"A pretty narrow escape," cried the latter. "Why, the place is alive with the reptiles."

"Looks like it, sir," said Griggs. "Dessay we're standing on some of their holes now."

"But don't you see?" cried Chris excitedly; "that second one's pinned by the tail. When I let my end fall it must have caught it fast."

"Rather a pity," said Griggs cynically. "It must have spoiled the rattle. S'pose it hurts too. Look at him!—That's no good, my beauty. Stone can't feel. Ah, you idiot, you don't belong to the wise serpents we read about. Look at him biting at the stone."

"In impotent malice," said the doctor, watching the frantic efforts of the reptile.

"That chap's safe enough now, Squire Chris."

"Safe! I shouldn't like to risk going near him."

"But you might; he's held fast by that tail of his, and all he could do would be to thrash you with his long body."

"And bite," said Chris.

"Nay; his biting would go for nothing now."

"What about his fangs?"

"Snapped off like points of glass. They were sharp enough and poisonous enough, but bound to say the poison's all out on the stone, along with the teeth. Razors are very sharp and would make horrible cuts, but not after you'd been chopping a piece of stone with them like that, eh, doctor?"

"I think you are right, Griggs," said the doctor, who seemed fascinated by the reptile's impotent struggles.

"Well, you are a sneak," cried Griggs. "Gahn with you! I'd put my tail between my legs if I were you, only you haven't got none. That's right; rattle away. I say, I hope he hasn't gone to fetch a lot of his mates to pitch into us."

"That's not likely," said the doctor, as he watched the bigger and free snake gliding swiftly away, heedless of the struggles of its companion, which was evidently growing exhausted by its furious efforts to release the lower portion of its body.

"What are you going to do?" said the doctor quickly, as Griggs handed him his horse's rein again.

"I'm going to put that chap out of his misery, sir," replied the American.

"No, no; don't fire. It's waste of a charge."

"Not a-going to, sir. There's more ways of killing a cat, you know, than hanging it. Eh, Squire Chris?"

As he spoke Griggs put his hand to his belt, in which a stout keen hunting or bowie-knife was stuck, and drew out the glittering blade.

"Going to cut his head off?" said Chris eagerly.

"Yes, unless you like to, squire."

"I will," cried Chris.

"I don't want you to run any risks, my boy," said the doctor. "Do you think you can do it without danger?"

"Oh yes, father," said the lad, drawing his own perfectly new knife. "See how slowly the thing keeps on lifting up its head, to hold it quivering in the air before letting it fall down again on the rock."

"But if it saw you go near it might strike at you."

"I don't think so, father. Look, it must be blind. It has battered its head horribly against the stone. I think it's quite blind."

"So it is, sir," said Griggs. "There's no more danger there, sir. Let him do it. We want him to be cool and ready for anything now."

"May I do it, father?"

"Well, yes; but stand well at arm's length, and give a good, careful, sweeping draw-cut with your knife."

Chris eagerly handed his rein to his father, and then went cautiously towards the quivering reptile, which kept on rising up and falling down inert with a regular action, save that it grew more slow.

Chris drew near till he was almost within striking distance, and waited till the snake had risen to its greatest height, that is to say, about two feet above the stone and three feet in all from the sand on which the boy stood.

"Take care," said the doctor.

Chris made an offer, as boys call it, cutting horizontally from his left shoulder, the knife flashing in the sunshine as it *whished* through the air, passing inches from the snake's neck; but the motion of the air affected the reptile, which winced, dropped flat to the stone, and began to writhe frantically.

"Be careful, Chris; there's a great deal of life in it yet."

"That was only a try, father," replied the boy; "I didn't try to cut it. I will, though, now," he continued, as the writhing ceased; but the battered head began to rise again slowly and steadily in the air till it was at its greatest elevation, and seemed to be kept up by a stiffening of the whole body.

Meanwhile, watching it carefully, the boy had advanced his foot a few inches till he felt that he was in exact striking distance, when there was another bright flash of rays reflected from the glistening blade, as the cut was made and the snake dropped down again upon the stone, for the writhings to recommence.

"Missed him?" cried Griggs excitedly.

"No; I just touched him with the point," said Chris coolly. "I wasn't quite near enough."

Proof of the correctness of his words was given by a red mark or two on the surface of the stone as the writhings ceased and the reptile began once more to raise itself quivering slowly till it was rigid, and at its full height, when without a moment's pause the knife flashed again, there was a vigorous draw-cut, and the dangerous head dropped with a loud pat on the stone, leaving the erect

neck and body stiffly poised for a few moments, slowly waving to and fro, before falling like a piece of stick, and seeming to break as part fell out of sight.

"Bravo!" cried Griggs.

"Ah, my boy! Mind!" cried the doctor.

But before his warning cry was half uttered there had been another flash as of something glistening in the air, and Chris started back again, receiving what felt to be a sharp blow in the chest, while a larger rattlesnake than either of the others dropped back behind the stone and glided rapidly away.

The doctor had Chris by the arms the next moment.

"Where—where did it strike you?" he cried.

"Here, father—such a thump," said the boy coolly, touching the fold of his Norfolk jacket with his left hand. "Ugh! Something wet."

He snatched back his hand, to hold it out, for a tiny smear of moisture to be seen glistening in the sun upon the palm of his hand.

The doctor seized him by the wrist, and then examined the fold of the jacket.

"Do you feel anything—a prick in the chest?" he said hoarsely.

"No, father. It was a sharp thump, as if some one had thrown a stone."

"Here is the venom on the thick frieze," said the doctor, tearing open the jacket and examining the thin flannel shirt beneath. "No! Thank Heaven!" he cried, with a sigh of relief. "The fangs did not go through. Chris, boy, you have escaped. If the reptile had driven its fangs deeper, I fear that I couldn't have saved your life."

"That doesn't sound very nice, father," said the boy coolly; but Griggs noted that he changed colour, and then laid his hands upon his father's shoulders, after dropping his knife on the ground.

"It was a miss, doctor," said Griggs, breaking the silence, as he scooped up some of the dried sand and rubbed Chris's hand, and with another handful dried the fold of the jacket.

This he repeated two or three times, and also paused to look well inside the fold next the boy's chest.

"Didn't go through, sir; that's for certain," he said. "There'll be no danger in the poison as soon as it's dried in the sun."

"None whatever, I should say," replied the doctor. "There, let's get away from this horrible place. I don't know how we're going to get those kegs again. The danger seems too great."

"Not after dark, sir," said Griggs coolly. "We must have 'em though, and I'm going to do it somehow, cost what it may."

The next minute they had mounted and were riding slowly back to where the others were about to come in search of them, in alarm at their prolonged absence.





CHAPTER XV

DRY FISHING

THERE was a short, sharp council of ways and means held in the soft evening light which bathed the sterile rocky plain and the distant mountainous land with a weird beauty, that made those who gazed around feel a sensation of wonder, that nature could spread such a mask over a scene whose aspect to the adventurers was full of the horrors of thirst, and death by the stroke of the venomous reptiles.

Close at hand, and showing no disposition to stray, were the horses and the mules, with their coats bristling with dried sweat, and the dust through which they had travelled.

Their packs remained untouched, for every one felt that it was impossible to stay where they were, while before starting afresh water was an absolute necessity—a draught each to allay the feverish thirst, and the contents of one keg carefully divided so that about a pint each could be given to the wearied beasts.

“But there must be water somewhere near on that higher ground,” said Wilton excitedly, and the doctor noted that his eyes looked bloodshot and wild. “Here, I tell you what; I’ll take our bearings and ride off to see what I can find, and then come back.”

“No,” said the doctor, “it is impossible. Look at your

horse: he cannot carry you right up yonder for miles upon miles in the state he is in."

"Then I must walk," cried Wilton impetuously.

"You would break down before you had been gone an hour," said the doctor, "and we should have to search for you and bring you back."

"Oh! give me credit for a little more strength and determination, sir," said Wilton petulantly. "We must have water, and it is to be found up yonder in the hills. What do you say, Bourne?"

"I agree with you that water may be found yonder, but we must keep together. Our party is small enough as it is; we must not make it less by letting one of our most active members break away."

"Then what are we to do?" cried Wilton, and the boys' lips moved as if they echoed his words.

"We must wait till dark, and then get the kegs. After the whole party is refreshed, we must strike up into the hills at once and search the valleys till we find a fall or spring, but on no account must we separate."

So spoke the doctor, but Wilton was in no humour for obeying orders.

"I think you are wrong," he cried.

"Well," replied the doctor stiffly, "you have a right to think so, but you might as well bear in mind that you have sworn to obey orders, that I was elected to be chief of this expedition, and that it is your duty to obey—in reason."

"Do you want to quarrel?" cried Wilton, clapping his hand to his revolver-holster.

"Certainly not with a man half mad with thirst," said the doctor quietly. "Come, Wilton, be reasonable."

"Reasonable! Are we not all half dead with thirst?"

"Suffering, not half dead," replied the doctor, who noted that Bourne and Griggs had moved a little nearer to their angry companion. "Now, look here, we want your cool consideration of our position. We have water a few hundred yards away."

"What! Where?"

"In the kegs, which lie where I told you."

"Oh, there!" cried Wilton contemptuously. "We don't want that, but some big clear flowing spring such as I offer to risk my life to find."

"Risk your life in another way," said the doctor firmly.

"How?"

"Go and fetch in the kegs from where they are lying."

"Bah! If I am to die, it shall be a decent death—not stung by some horrible reptile. I'll risk losing my way going in search of water."

"I have already told you," said the doctor, "that the state of the horses will not allow of such a search being made till they have had such water as we have near. The only thing to be done is to contrive some way of getting the kegs here without risk."

"Exactly," said Bourne laconically; "but can you propose any way? For I must own that I cannot without horrible risk."

"At present no way," said the doctor sadly. "My only hope is in the horrible pests returning deeply underground at night; but I am sorry to say I know very little about the habits of these creatures. Do you, Wilton?"

"No," replied their companion bitterly. "Latin, Greek, and mathematics were taught me, rattlesnakes left out."

"But you," said the doctor, wincing at his companion's contemptuous manner, "you, Griggs, have seen a good deal of these reptiles in your time?"

"Tidy bit, sir. I saw one poor fellow die four hours after being bitten, and I've killed a few of the varmint; but I've seen more of 'em to-day than in all my life before."

"Then you cannot say whether it would be safe to risk an attempt to get the kegs away?"

"Well, I don't know about that," said Griggs, who noted that Chris was watching him intently. "You see, sir, I've been thinking pretty closely about that matter. We must have those kegs somehow, even if the one who gets 'em is bitten for his pains."

"Oh, but no such risk must be run," cried the doctor excitedly.

"It seems to me, sir, that it must. There's half-a-dozen of us, and one has to take his chance so that the other five may live."

"Our position is not so bad as that, Griggs," said the doctor warmly.

"I don't want to contradict, sir, but I about think it is. It's the sort of time like you read about at sea when they cast lots and one has to swim ashore with a rope so as to get help. We must have that water, and Mr. Wilton here says he won't risk the job of fetching the kegs, so it rests with five of us instead of six. Then you go a bit further and one says, here's three men and two boys, and we who are men can't hold back and let a boy go."

"Certainly not," said the doctor and Bourne, as if in one voice.

"Then we come down to three," continued Griggs, "and one of them is the boss of the expedition—the captain. He can't go, of course. So you see, Mr. Bourne, it lies between us two."

"No, no," cried the doctor, "between us three."

"Us *two*, Mr. Bourne," said the American, almost fiercely. "The doctor's out of it. Now, sir, you're a deal better man than I am in learning and proper living, and several other things that I've noticed since we've been neighbours, all through your having been a minister, I suppose?"

"I am but a man, Griggs, with the weaknesses of my nature."

"Exactly, sir," cried the American, totally misconstruing the speaker's meaning. "That's what I was aiming at—weaknesses of your nature. Consequently I'm a much better man than you are for this job. So we want no casting lots, for I'm going to get those kegs out of that serpent's nest, if I die for it."

"No, no," cried the doctor fiercely. "I will not consent to your going. We must try some other plan."

"There aren't no other plan, doctor."

"I think there is," cried Chris excitedly.

"Be silent, boy!" said the doctor.

"Yes, you're out, squire," said Griggs good-humouredly. "You've had your innings, and nearly got bitten. That's taste enough for you. Let me have a bit of the fun. But look here, doctor; when a man is bitten you get out a bottle and a little squirt thing, make a hole in one of the veins, and send in a lot of stuff, don't you?"

"Inject ammonia?" replied the doctor. "Yes; as a resource after lancing the wound and drawing out the poison, I should try that."

"Ammonia," said Griggs thoughtfully. "Yes, that's it—counteracts the poison, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and in some cases successfully, if it has been injected soon enough."

"Hah!" cried the American. "That's what I wanted to get at—soon enough. Now how would it be if to get quite soon enough you got out your bottle and gave me a dose of that stuff before I started?"

"What, injected into one of your veins?"

"Yes, sir. What do you say to that?"

"Impossible! I would not venture upon such an experiment except with a bitten subject."

"Sorry to hear that, sir," said Griggs thoughtfully. "Well, how would it be if I swallowed some?"

"I fear that it would be useless."

"Very well, sir; you know best, and I must do without it. My boots will pull up a bit higher, and I'll slip on another pair of trousers and my thick jersey over my jacket; then if one of the beauties bites, his teeth may not go through. There'll only be my hands and face."

"But what do you propose doing—running in, seizing the kegs, and trying to carry them out?"

"Nay, that makes the job too risky, sir. It would be just stirring the creatures up like bees in a hive, and they'd come raging out to fight. I've got a better plan than that."

"Yes; what is it?" said the doctor, and Chris took a step nearer.

"Just this, sir. I'll take a couple of the hide ropes, knot them together, and coil them up lasso fashion. After

that I'm going to make a fire and heat one of these iron tent-pegs red hot—one of those with the eye to them. Soon as it's well hot I'm going to bend it round into a hook, slip one end of the rope through the eye and make fast, and then I'm going to fish with that hook—throwing it in till it catches the keg chain that couples them together, and as soon as I've got a bite run out the line ready for a couple of us to haul the water right away clean from the snake's nest. What do you say to that?"

"I say it isn't fair," cried Chris excitedly. "You, Ned, you are a sneak to go and tell him."

"I didn't tell him," cried Ned indignantly.

"How did he know, then?" said Chris, growing angry. "I never said a word to any one else."

"What do you mean, Chris?" said the doctor sternly.

"Why, I invented that plan, father," cried Chris, "exactly as Griggs says; and I was going to propose it, only Griggs spoke first."

"I never knew you thought the same way, squire," said Griggs quietly.

"It was my invention," said Chris warmly.

"Very well, lad, you may have it," said Griggs. "It's yours, then."

"Yes," cried Chris, "and I'll go and throw the hook till I catch the chain."

"Nay! That's where I come in, my lad," cried Griggs. "You shall have all the credit, but I'll do the work."

"No, no," said Chris angrily. "It's my invention, and I shall do it."

"No," said the doctor firmly; "you both had the same idea, my boy, but Mr. Griggs is your senior, he is better adapted for the dangerous task, and you must give way."

"Must I, father?" said the boy, in a disappointed tone.

"Yes. You have run risks enough for one day."

"Ha, ha!" cried Ned, laughing, to the astonishment of all, and his satisfaction rang out in his tones. "You can't do it, after all, Griggs," and though he said no more his eyes looked a finish to the sentence—serve you right for getting the better of Chris!

"Why can't I do it?" said Griggs quietly.

"Because there's no fire to heat the iron."

"But I can soon make one."

"What of? Stones?"

Griggs brought his right fist down into his left hand with a loud *spang*, uttering a low hiss the while, for there was not a scrap of wood in sight.

Then his face lit up and he went to the mule laden with the tent, cast loose a rope, and ran an iron ringed peg about two feet long off from where it had been placed for safety, and walked off amongst the rocks till he found a crevice suited to his purpose. There he thrust the thin end of the peg in between the sides some six inches, and exerting his strength a little, bent the iron round till the lower part stood off at right angles to the upper. This done, he raised the iron, placed the point upon the surface of a level block, and pressed heavily down, the point yielding slowly, and the iron being fairly soft he very shortly produced a roughly-made hook.

"'Taint so neat as I could wish," he said quietly; "but it is a hook, and you can't call it anything else."

"Yes," said Chris frankly, "and it's a better one than I expected; but wouldn't it be better to try if you can catch the chain with it before it gets dark?"

"He would have to keep on throwing several times perhaps," said Bourne, "and bring the snakes swarming out."

"Well, I don't know that it would matter much," said Griggs thoughtfully. "I should be standing perhaps a dozen yards from where the hook kept on falling, and they'd strike at it and not at me. I shall try it at once, doctor, for it'll be far better than doing it by lanthorn light."

"Yes," said the doctor thoughtfully; "and at the worst, if the reptiles swarmed out, we would hurry away till they settled down again."

"Yes," said Griggs, with a quick nod of the head, and a few minutes later he had his tackle ready, the hook securely tied on, the rope hanging in coils from his hand, and all ready for the advance.

"I'll go alone, please, and at once," he said sharply. "In ten minutes it will be getting dusk. Did any one notice whether the chain lay at the top?"

"Yes," cried Chris sharply; "I did. So that it would be quite easy to catch."

"Good," cried Griggs, in a satisfied tone. "Then here goes."

"Promise me you'll be careful, Griggs," said the doctor.

"Yes, sir," said the American, smiling, "if you'll strike a bargain."

"What do you mean?"

"Promise me you'll have that stuff ready to give me a strong dose if I'm bitten."

"Trust me," said the doctor.

"And trust me, sir," cried Griggs.

The next minute he was striding along over the sand in and out amongst the scattered blocks of stone, and followed by his friends, cautiously on the alert for any reptiles that might be coiled up asleep.

But it was past their time; the sun had gone down, and the dusk of evening was rapidly growing into darkness, showing the party that if they had waited until a lanthorn was necessary there would have been great difficulty in putting into practice that which in theory sounded as easy as drawing on a glove.

"Not a snake was to be seen when the party halted, following Griggs's example, and standing about thirty feet behind him, the many blocks of rugged stone in front completely hiding the place where the barrels lay.

"Can you see any of the enemy?" said the doctor, just loudly enough for his voice to reach the American's ears.

Griggs turned quickly, shook his head to indicate that the coast was clear, and then turned back to face his task.

The next minute they saw the deftly-thrown hook flying through the air, describing a curve, and the rings of the rope opening out as they followed the iron.

There was a loud jangling sound, and Chris held his breath as he saw the operator begin to draw upon the rope

hand over hand, fully expecting to see a check, and that the hook had caught.

The boy was not disappointed—it had, and Chris uttered a low cheer.

“Got it!” he whispered.—“Why is he doing that?”

That was the jerking of the rope to set it at liberty to be drawn in again, for the simple reason that the catch was only the corner of a rock.

But Griggs was soon ready again, and he mounted on to the top of a stone before taking careful aim, as he swung the hook to and fro, and then once more launched it through the air, to fall this time with a dull sound as if it had struck upon wood.

“He’ll do it this time,” whispered Ned excitedly. “Yes: he has got it.”

For as Griggs hauled there was again a check, evidently, from the sound of the iron, against wood.

“Oh!” groaned Chris, as they saw the rope hauled in again quickly for another throw. “What a while he is! He won’t be able to see.”

“All right, Chris,” cried Ned cheerily; “third time never fails.”

“We shall have to do it, Ned,” replied Chris merrily. “Now then, once to be ready, twice to be steady, three times to be off: there it goes.”

Away went the hook, and after it the dimly-seen coils of rope, followed by a sharp clang again of iron upon stone.

“Now he’s hauling,” whispered Ned, and all held their breath, for the change from daylight into darkness was rapidly going on, and Griggs’s figure standing erect upon the grey rock began to look as if some thin, filmy, smoke-tinted veil was being drawn over it.

Tchingle! came—clearly heard.!

“Hurrah!” cried Chris. “He has caught the chain this time. He’ll want us to help haul.”

The boy strained forward as if ready to start at the first call; but he did not, for no call came, but Griggs himself began to move sharply after a tug at the rope, and then

leaping down from the stone upon which he had stood, he came running towards them swiftly, dodging in and out amongst the stones standing in his way.

"Off with you," he shouted; "the varmint are coming along the rope!"

All turned at the order, retreating steadily to allow Griggs to overtake them, which he did directly.

"I don't think we need go far," he said. "I don't suppose they'll come further than the end of the rope. I could see dozens of them striking at the barrel and the hook at that last throw. We shall have to let them settle down before we try to get the water, but I've hooked the chain fast."

"Then we can do the rest after dark," said the doctor.

"Well, not quite, sir. We shall have to bring a light to find the end of the rope and see that there are none of the reptiles hanging on to it."

"Yes, exactly."

"Why not bring one of the mules next time?" cried Chris eagerly.

"What for?" said Griggs sharply.

"To make fast the line to his saddle or pack, and let him drag the barrels over the sand.

"Good!" cried Griggs.

"Excellent!" said the doctor.

"I wonder whether the snakes will follow when the kegs are being dragged over the sand?" said Bourne.

"I don't think they will, sir," said the American. "They might perhaps if there are any about after dark, but there are lots of small stones about where they lie, and the critters will have an ugly time of it ground under those two heavy tubs."

"I'm in hopes that we shall have no further trouble," said the doctor thoughtfully. "The only thing to decide now is, how long had we better wait?"

"An hour," said Wilton decisively; and that hour was passed in luxury, for a soft cool air came whispering among the reeking stones which had been bathing all day long in the sunshine, and there was a crispness and revivifying

sensation in that gentle evening breeze which seemed to affect even the animals, the mules crouching down in the sand and the horses standing facing the quarter from which the wind blew, as if satisfied to wait for the water that they instinctively expected would come.

The hour seemed long, and then with a dull star-like lantern Griggs began to pick his way through the transparent darkness, holding the light low in his look-out for enemies, till the end of the rope was found, though not without difficulty, the boys, who led one of the mules between them, having to stop at last and wait till the search came to an end.

"No snakes about here," said Griggs, in a low voice; "bring the mule on, lads. That's right. Now then, turn. Back him a little more."

This was done, the rope made fast to the pack-saddle, and all was ready.

"Now," said the doctor, "will the enemy follow the two kegs or no? Forward!"





CHAPTER XVI

SADDLE NAPS

THE start was made in the direction of the spot where the rest of the train was gathered together, and with all present feeling flushed with excitement and in dread of what might happen, the rope tightened with a jerk, and then threatened to break, for there was no yielding on the part of the kegs after they had followed for a few yards, the sound announcing that they had caught and become wedged amongst the stones.

In the midst of a painful silence Griggs said in rather an altered tone—

“Well, it’s of no use to make bones about it. I shall have to go and give ’em a clearing shove or two.”

“You’ll do no such mad thing,” cried the doctor angrily. “If the rattlesnakes will face the darkness they must be swarming out of their holes after this disturbance. Here, start afresh, Chris. Take the mule’s rein and lead him on steadily a little more to the right.”

This was done, but the kegs did not move.

“Try to the left now, my boy.”

Chris led the animal in the required direction, but the kegs remained fast.

“You’ll break the rope,” said Griggs.

“Then we must make fast another,” replied the doctor. “We must go farther off now, and pull at right angles.”

"You'll only get the rope cut by some of the upright stones," said Griggs bitterly. "It's of no use, doctor. I must go back and——"

Bump!

At that moment, before the American had finished his sentence, there was a quick movement, the tubs had yielded to the steady strain kept up by the mule, and for the next few minutes they came on, gliding easily over the sand, bumping and hopping over stones, against some of which they collided in a way that threatened to knock off hoops or drive in staves, but they kept on coming till the mule reached the first of its companions, when the doctor called a halt.

"Now then," he said, "lanthorn here!"

"What are you going to do, father?" cried Chris anxiously.

"Pass the light along the rope till I reach the tubs, to see if there are any snakes twisted about the chain."

"Nay, that's my job, sir," cried Griggs eagerly.

"We'll go together," said the doctor. "Every one else stand back."

The next minute Chris and Ned stood anxiously watching the light of the lanthorn, which was made to run along the rope and the ground till it played only upon the two kegs, which looked dull and indistinct by the shadowy figures which could be dimly seen.

"Look out, sir; there's one!" shouted Griggs out of the gloom, and the lanthorn seemed to make a sudden jump.

So did Chris's heart at the thought of the danger to which his father might be exposed.

The next moment the boy's pulsations seemed to have ceased, but only for a heavy throbbing to set in, before he gave vent to a low gasp of relief. For the doctor's voice came clearly to them in the grateful word, "*Crushed!*"

"It's all right, sir," said Griggs loudly then. "I've cut through him twice, and he has dropped off. Haul away there and pull 'em close up."

The order was obeyed by hand, and the kegs, illumined

by the light cast upon them by the lanthorn, were drawn right up to the halting-place.

"Don't cheer, boys," said the doctor, anticipating a shout. "Here, Griggs," he continued, "let's have a little sand over the chain where you cut that horrible reptile away."

"Hold the light a little lower, sir," said the American. "It's all right," he added the next minute, after the light had played over the connecting-links of the two kegs. "Sand's cleared it all away as they came. They're as clean as can be. I can't see anything on the rope or hook either."

"Was there one on it?" asked Chris eagerly.

"Yes, a big 'un," replied Griggs. "He'd tied himself in a tight knot close round the hook and the chain."

"It must have been that he was crushed when the kegs were first moved," said the doctor.

"Nay, sir; I fancy that it was when I hooked the chain. I fancy I must have caught him fast and dragged him close up."

"And then, in resentment," said the doctor, "the beast twined itself up tightly;—just like an eel on a night-line, boys," he added.

"Did you cut it away, Griggs?" asked Chris.

"Yes. I just slipped the point of my knife in between two of his coils twice over, gave a sharp push, and he dropped down wriggling at once."

"Did you see many more?" asked Ned.

"Nary one, my lad."

"A bucket here," said the doctor. "Let's run out a pannikin from one keg for each of the mustangs."

"Won't want a bucket then, sir."

"Nonsense, man! We can't give the mustangs their drop out of a tin. I want it poured into the bottom of the bucket so that each can suck it up to the last drop."

"I see, sir," cried Griggs, and as the tompion-like stop was unscrewed from the bung-hole of a keg, a shallow iron bucket was cast loose from one of the mule's loads, the noise in the darkness nearly driving the whole team

frantic, connecting the rattle of the handle as they did with water.

But they were kept back while the mustangs each took their tiny portions, uttering a piteous remonstrance-like sigh as the bucket was withdrawn again from its muzzle; and this done, the mules had their turn, two of them proving outrageous after getting their taste of water, Skeeter, as Griggs called him, seizing the edge of the bucket with his teeth and holding on till a sharp crack on the flank made him let go.

"Poor brutes!" said Ned's father. "It seems very hard upon them. Such a tiny drop each."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "but a score of these tiny drops make a hole in the contents of the keg. There, I don't think we have been unmerciful to our beasts. They have had the first turn. It is ours now."

The animals were driven back, and after the first keg had been as carefully closed up as if its contents were fine gold-dust, the second was opened, and a tin mug filled by the doctor, Wilton holding the little cask.

"Now, Ned, you're the youngest," cried the doctor.

"Oh, you have some first, sir," said the boy.

"Tip it up," cried the doctor fiercely. "My good lad, you don't know what agony it is to practise self-denial and etiquette at a time like this."

The doctor spoke so fiercely that his words, combined with the intense thirst from which he suffered, made the boy raise the cup to his lips, to feel a thrill of delight as the lukewarm water trickled down his parched throat.

The next moment, thanks to his father's teaching, he literally dragged the cup from his lips and thrust it in the face of Chris, who was looking at him by the lanthorn light, feeling in agony, and as if his eyes were starting out of his head.

"No, no!" he panted.

"Drink!" yelled Ned savagely.

"Yes, drink, boy!" cried the doctor. "Quick!"

The doubling of the emphatic command made Chris

obey, and he too sighed bitterly as he drained the last drop from the half-filled mug and passed it back.

"Quick, no more ceremony," cried the doctor, "or I shall be ready to forget myself, for I'm half mad with thirst. Fill up, Wilton. Now, Bourne, drink."

"No, no; you first."

"Drink!" roared the doctor, in a tone which startled his son, and without another word Ned's father half emptied the mug and handed it to Wilton, who hurriedly drained it, and began to fill it once more.

"My turn to order now," he cried, holding it to the doctor. "We've all had a taste now, Lee; you drink all that."

Griggs did not move a muscle, but stood firm, holding the lanthorn now; but he gave a side glance at the glistening cup as the doctor drank, suffering agony the while, but only to heave a sigh of thankfulness on seeing that his leader only swallowed half and then passed him the remainder.

"I thought dad wouldn't forget him," whispered Chris to Ned, and perhaps it might have been only a couple of drops of the water that had gone the wrong way, but certainly something like a couple of tears glistened for a few moments in Chris's eyes.

"Thank ye, doctor," said Griggs hoarsely, and the next moment there was a sound like *glug—glug!!* and the tin mug was empty.

"Must have another drink round; eh, doctor?" said Wilton.

"Drink?" was the reply. "Well, yes; fill up. We must find water to-morrow."

Half a cupful was passed to each then, swallowed with avidity, and then Wilton sighed as he helped to secure the tompion in its place.

"Now," cried the doctor, "we all want to lie down and rest, but I'm sure we should none of us sleep for thinking of water. The night is fairly clear, and I feel that I can guide you up the rising ground, so I propose that we go on at once."

"Yes, yes," cried Bourne; "on at any cost, to get away from this horrible nest of reptiles."

"But suppose we go blundering on among them," cried Wilton. "What do you say, Griggs?"

"I say let's get on, sir, for if we stop here we shall be getting no nearer water, and we shall be having the snakes coming to see where we are for killing that last one of their friends."

To get away from the horrors that haunted the spot was the great desire of all, and with the doctor and Griggs leading, the first a little in advance, and bearing the light, so as to avoid the blocks of stone projecting from the sand, the little party went slowly on hour after hour, ready to stop again and again to throw themselves down and rest. But no one dared to do so lest the jar given to the earth should send some of the poisonous reptiles to the surface in search of the enemy that had intruded upon the solitude which they seemed from their numbers to have marked down for their own domain.

The greater part of that night seemed to the two boys like a feverish dream, during which they had been compelled by some strange force to keep plodding on through horrors unspeakable, and tortured by a thirst that was maddening.

At times, where the stones lay thick, hardly a word was spoken, but now and again Chris would begin questioning his companion loudly, eager to obtain his opinion as to whether he did not think it must be nearly morning.

But Ned's answers were not encouraging. There was no romance in them; they were too near the truth to suit Chris, and he liked them the less because at heart he felt that they must be correct and his own hopes too sanguine. But all the same he clung to his own ideas—they were so tempting. They were that with daylight they should have reached the end of the wild desert, and that from high up on some sunlit slope they would be gazing down into a broad green valley—some natural paradise through which flowed a rippling stream.

He described his notions to Ned, who seemed to be

listening attentively in the darkness, and now and then said "Oh," or "Ah, yes"; but all the time he was clinging involuntarily to his saddle, his head nodding forward again and again, only to be brought back to the perpendicular with a jerk, while Chris was too drowsy himself to notice it, as he went muttering on.

"It won't be the place where the gold city and temple are, Ned," he said; "but it will be just the spot where we can rest for a few days."

"Ah!" said Ned.

"There'll be fish in that river, you know," said Chris—"salmon that have come up out of the Pacific; and we can spear them after we've drunk all we want, and bathed till we've soaked all this horrible dryness out of our skins. All along by the river too there'll be park-like meadows—meadows—green meadows. Do you hear?"

Ned grunted.

"And in those park-like prairie places there are sure to be droves of buffalo. Beef—do you hear?—beef!"

Chris's head bowed down as if he were going to lay his forehead upon his mustang's neck; but the thought of roast beef woke him up again, and he clung a little more tightly with his knees and kept on with his muttering.

"I say, don't go to sleep, Ned," he said, as he saw his companion follow his own example and bow low. "I feel as sure as sure that's the sort of place we shall come to. There'll be great spreading fir-trees too, such as Griggs talked about seeing up north in the Rockies—trees with boughs that will keep off the sun and rain, eh?"

"Ah!" grunted Ned.

"It will be just the place that we want, to give the horses and mules a good long rest for a few days, to feed up well on good pasture while we shoot, and amuse ourselves, and kill buffalo, and eat hot roast beef—hot roast beef. And drink beautiful, clear, cold water—and you can lie down upon your chest with your face over the running stream, and drink as long as you like of the clear, cold, sparkling water—sparkling water—sparkling water—sparkling—wa——"

"Ah!" said Ned.

"Come, boys; come, boys!" said a familiar voice out of the darkness.

"Sparkling water," repeated Chris drowsily. "Much as you like, Mr. Bourne."

"To be sure, my boy," said the owner of the name, laying one hand upon Chris's shoulder, the other upon Ned's, but with no effect whatever save to make them both seem to roll in their saddles as he forced his horse in between them. "Sit up; come, or you'll be falling out of the saddle. Very sleepy, Ned?"

"Ah!" grunted the boy.

"Poor fellow!" said Bourne, with a sigh. Then aloud—"Can't you keep awake, Chris?"

"Spear fish—salmon—sparkling water," sighed the boy, bowing very low this time.

"Come, try and wake up, my lad; we're getting on higher ground, and it's not so rocky here. As soon as day begins to break we shall come to a halt, and rest for a few hours—that is, if we can be sure that there are no rattlesnakes near."

"Eh? Snakes?" said Chris, sitting very upright now, and gazing in the face of Ned's father. "Yes, snakes. Made the water taste snaky. Horrid! Dries up your tongue. Tasted snaky."

"Mine didn't," said Bourne. "I thought it was the sweetest drop I ever tasted in my life. Come, come, Ned; do you want me to hold you on your pony? Keep up a little longer, boy."

"Ah!" grunted Ned, straightening himself and feeling about for the reins, which had escaped his hand, not that any guidance was wanted, the intelligent beast following the light of the lanthorn, clearly seen moving ahead as Griggs' mustang plodded on.

"Why, you're asleep, Ned."

"No, father," answered the boy, telling a most brazen falsehood, for the moment before he was breathing so hard that the sounds were first cousins to heavy snores.

"That's right, then. We've had a long weary ride

to-day, but we're going up-hill now and the air's growing cooler. We must be leaving the sandy plains behind."

"Yes, leave behind. Won't fall off," muttered Ned, who was sinking fast into a state of stupor.

And all the while from ahead, close by the moving lantern, came the musical *cling, cling, cling, cling* of the mules' bell, with the low muttering sound made by the doctor and Griggs as they entered into a conversation about the state of the country into which they were penetrating.

"Poor fellows!" said Bourne half aloud. "I can do nothing to keep them awake. Perhaps they will not fall off, after all."

It was growing darker, but he noted that the mustangs seemed to regulate their movements to those of their riders, and in nowise altered their steady walk when one or the other lurched and made a spasmodic effort to recover himself.

Then Bourne sighed and looked right ahead at the dull star of the lantern in front, some of whose rays fell from time to time upon the moving pack carried by one of the mules. From that he turned his eyes upward to the glorious stars, whose rays gave just sufficient light to enable the line of animals to avoid any obstacle in the way, though that was seldom, for Skeeter plodded steadily along with his bell, and the mules which followed almost planted their hoofs, elephant-fashion, in the prints made by those which had gone before.

"What a long, long, weary night!" sighed Bourne at last. "Will the morning never come?"

"Who's that?"—a sharp voice from close behind.

"I. Anything the matter, Wilton?"

"Yes; I nearly fell off my nag just now, to be left behind."

"You mustn't do that. 'Ware snakes."

"Oh, don't mention them," came with a shudder. "But thank goodness!"

"By all means; but for what in particular now?"

"You gave me such a fright."

"I did? How? I've been here with the boys for the last quarter of an hour."

"The boys? Where are they?"

"Here, one each side."

"Oh! I thought those were mules with packs. Do you hear, lads?"

There was no reply.

"What's the matter with them? Tired and sulky?"

"Tired? Yes! Sulky? No. They're both fast asleep."

"Poor fellows! No wonder. So was I just now."

"But you said I gave you a fright. I did nothing. What was it?"

"I was fast asleep, I tell you, holding on I suppose by my knees, when I woke up and found that you were not by my side."

"But I told you I was going to ride on and see how the boys were getting on."

"Did you? I didn't hear a word. I must have been sound."

"But you answered me, and said, 'All right.'"

"Very likely, but it was in my sleep. When I woke up, though, and found you were not with me, it was a regular shock, for I thought you must have fallen off and be lying somewhere in the darkness and your nag beside you. The sensation was horrible, for in my stupid sleepy state I felt that we might never find you again."

"How horrible!"

"It was, I can tell you. It roused me up a bit, and I had common-sense enough left in the midst of my scare to push on first and make sure. You can't think what a feeling of relief it gave me when you answered. I say, it would be awful if either of us were lost."

"Awful indeed," said Bourne, with a sigh. "We're on a wild chase, Wilton."

"We are; but we're in for it, and we must carry it through."

"I suppose so; but one night like this is enough. I say, will it ever be morning?"

There was no reply, and they went on for a few minutes in silence, and then there was a sudden check.

"What's wrong now?" said Wilton sharply.

"Anything the matter, Lee?" cried Bourne, for the mules seemed to have come to a sudden stop, just as if all had been moved by one impulse communicated to them by their leader.

"I don't know yet, and I'm obliged to be very cautious."

"Strikes me that we've been coming up and up for the last hour, sir," said Griggs, "and that we're now just at the edge of a cañon with a drop down to nowhere just ahead. Skeeter came to a stop all at once."

"I'll get down and see what I can make out with the lanthorn."

"Wait a minute, sir, while I get a rope uncoiled. You shall have it fast round you and the other end to my saddle. These places go straight down sometimes hundreds of feet to a river. Listen! Can you hear water?"

There was silence for a few moments before the doctor said—

"No."

"Too deep down perhaps, sir."

"Well, I can soon see if I go cautiously, and you let the rope pass slowly through your hands. But try first if the bell-mule will take a step or two in advance."

"Not he, sir. I can see; he's got his legs all spread out like a milking-stool."

The doctor was off his horse, and the next minute he was advancing slowly, with the lanthorn held near the ground.

"There's nothing here that need have stopped him, but—Oh, what a blessing!"

"What is, sir?"

"Here's short grass, and the mules cropping it."

"Then there's no cañon, sir," said Griggs sharply. "The poor brutes are all dead beat; they've come to something that they can nibble, and they've struck work. The ponies are at it too. It's as good as saying that they won't stir another peg till daylight, if they will then."

"Why, two of the mules have regularly squatted down, with their loads touching the ground," said the doctor, holding up the lanthorn.

"Yes, it's all right, sir," cried Griggs. "There's no cañon, but level ground all about, I'll be bound. They've called a halt without being told, so we must do the same."

"But here, with those horrible snakes about?" cried Bourne.

"None here, sir," said Griggs. "If there were one it would have been smelt out by this time, and the poor beasts wouldn't have been so quiet. Oh, we're right for a time, sir; and, I say, hadn't we better follow the beasts' example and find a bit of something to eat?"

"And drink?" said Wilton.

"Nay, eating will make our mouths turn a bit moist; we've no business to touch any more of that water till we know where the next is to come from. Let's chance it, sir, and relieve the poor brutes of their packs."

"Very well," said the doctor, "but I don't like halting without knowing our ground. You know my rules that I laid down."

"No rule without an exception," said Wilton drowsily. "This is one. I don't want anything to eat, but if I die for it I must sleep."

"Well, I'll do the best I can to keep watch with the lanthorn," said the doctor; "but some one must relieve me soon."

"Put the light out, sir," said Griggs. "There's morning coming yonder. It's of no use, sir. We must chance everything and sleep. I can't keep awake any more."

"Let's have the packs off, then. By the way, where are the boys?"

"Here are their ponies," replied Bourne, peering about in the darkness. "Tut, tut, tut! Here they are upon the ground, fast asleep too. Here, Ned—Chris! Wake up, my lads; you can't lie there."

Ned's father was never more away from the truth in an assertion. In fact, he was quite wrong, for the two

boys were proving that they could lie there, and were sleeping heavily, careless of snakes, and ponies' or mules' hoofs, careless of everything but obeying the stern dictates of a monitor who bade them sleep and make up for lost time.

Hunger and thirst did not exist to them then, nor did they to any other member of the expedition, for when day came brightly, not very long after, it was to look down upon the strange group of horses, mules, packs, and men, lying anyhow upon a wide down-like place covered with thin, short, crisp grass, which the animals were browsing upon contentedly enough.

Fortunately for the party there was no sign of danger far or near—nothing but rolling down for a few miles, and beyond that mountains towering up towards the clouds, looking clear and distinct in the pearly grey of morning, and apparently close at hand, though some sixty or seventy miles away.





CHAPTER XVII

‘WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT——’

“**H** ALLO! What’s that?” said Chris softly, as he lay on his left side gazing at an elevation about a couple of feet from his nose; and it was some time before he could make out that it was a sack, stuffed so full that it threatened to burst the coarse stitches down one side.

His head felt confused and thick. His thinking apparatus would not work properly, but seemed to be struggling to carry on the narrative of some weary dream in which there had been snakes, heat, thirst, and riding, till his bones seemed to ache and he felt sore all over.

It was very puzzling, and though he tried to make out where he was, he could see nothing but that big sack.

After lying still for some minutes, his reasoning powers began to act, and overcoming the disinclination to move, consequent upon his being so horribly stiff, he gave himself a wrench and turned right over on his other side.

This brought a little illumination, bodily and mental too, for the sun was beating down upon his face making him raise his hand stiffly to shade his eyes; and there before him lay Ned, flat upon his back, with his mouth wide open.

The mist floating in his brain now began to disperse, and rising upon one elbow he could see first one and then another of the party, lying fast asleep in different attitudes

with the packs belonging to the expedition dotted about anyhow, just as they had been released from the mules' backs.

Then there were the bearers of the said packs about a couple of hundred yards away, every one with its muzzle near the ground, browsing busily at some kind of low, scrubby, greyish growth that looked like very dwarf juniper, while in quite another direction there they were—all six—forming a group to themselves—the mustangs, their saddles still on and the reins upon the ground, cropping away at the thin wiry grass that clothed the sandy earth.

"Of course; I recollect now," thought Chris. "I went to sleep on my pony, and must have fallen off without waking. Am I hurt?"

He screwed himself about and raised arms and legs, wincing a little the while.

"Yes, I am hurt," he muttered. "I can hardly move, but I don't think anything's broken: it's just as if the mules had been kicking me and the ponies walking about on my chest."

His eyes wandered round again, and he sat up now with a start, the aforesaid eyes dilating and the lids getting so wide that he showed a good deal of white, while it seemed as if all the blood in his body had rushed to his heart, so horrible were his thoughts. But he could see no sign of rattlesnakes, and the heavy throbbing in his breast calmed down, to give place to a sensation of pleasure, as he breathed in the fresh elastic air and let his eyes rest upon a great blue mountain which towered up above a clump of a dozen or so on one side and as many more spreading away in a row, their tops looking like the teeth of a gigantic saw. In fact, it was one of the ranges to which the old Spanish settlers gave the name of Sierras.

"It is not what I dreamed about," said Chris to himself. "Let me see—yes, that was of looking down into a glorious green valley with a sparkling river running through and beautiful park-like prairies on each side for the mules and ponies to graze in while we hunted and shot

the buffaloes. Of course ; I remember it all quite clearly, and about our going to bathe and drink, and—oh, how thirsty I am !”

“Why, there must be water here, or the animals wouldn’t be so contented. Get enough juice out of what they’re eating, I suppose,” he added, after a few minutes’ more thought. “Well, this is a hundred times better than the salt desert, and there must be water in the valleys over yonder. How blue it all looks ! That doesn’t seem as if there were trees, because they’d look green. But there must be valleys because there are mountains, and——Here, I say, Ned, don’t snore like that,” he said aloud. “Wake up, lazy ! It’s ever so late.”

His words having no effect, he reached out one foot and gave the boy such a vigorous push that Ned sat up, staring.

“Who——Here, you, Chris, why did you kick me like that ?” he cried.

“I didn’t kick, only pushed. To wake you up. You can’t sleep all day. Oh, I say, what a face you’ve got !”

Ned, who had roused up at once, clapped his hands to the part of his person alluded to, and retaliated.

“So have you got a face,” he cried. “Why, it looks as if it had got a crust of salt and sand all over it.”

“So it has, I suppose,” said Chris, rather gruffly, as he began to pat his cheeks softly, rub his eyes, and then deal very tenderly with his cracked lips. “Oh dear, shouldn’t I like a swim, even if it was only in a water-hole that was half mud !”

“But I say, Chris, look here. What about the rattlesnakes ? Have we left them all behind ?”

“I hope so. There seems to be no sign of any here.”

“And I say, this is quite a different sort of country. Look at the mountains.”

“I have.”

“We must be all right then, now,” continued Ned. “I began to think yesterday that we were going to tramp along till the heat and thirst were too much for us, and

we had to lie down and die. I say, I shouldn’t have liked that.”

“And you’ll never find any one who would. Bother the old gold! It would have been horrid. Better have gone on weeding in the plantation.”

“Ever so much; but do you think the place marked in the plan is over yonder?”

Ned pointed at the beautiful amethystine mountains, but Chris shook his head.

“Don’t look like the place; but never mind that now. Let’s see about breakfast.”

The boys rose as if animated by one spirit, and stood looking round.

“What about a fire?” said Ned dismally.

“No wood,” replied Chris, with a groan, and his voice made his father start, look sharply round, and spring to his feet.

“Ah, boys!” he cried. “How long have you been awake?”

This question, loudly uttered, had the effect of a call to the other sleepers, who rose to their feet, to look about in a dazed and wondering manner, but with signs of satisfaction dawning upon their countenances as they grasped the improvement in their position.

“Yes,” said the doctor, after a brief conversation, “the cattle are all right, and will be able to go on after another hour’s grazing; but there is no water, I’m afraid, nearer than the mountains yonder.”

“But there’ll be plenty there, doctor,” said Griggs confidently, “and I don’t see that we need wait for the animals to graze any more; they haven’t done much amiss by the state of their portmanteaus. We can halt again when we like, and the pasture’s sure to get better as we go along towards the mountain-slopes. Would you mind getting out your glass?”

This was quickly done, and the American focussed it and stood gazing long and intently at the distant range.

“Far as I can make out,” he said at last, “there’s river and valley and forest yonder, sir.”

"Forests with blue trees, Griggs?" said Chris.

"Forests with trees that look blue at this distance," replied the American. "That last makes a wonderful difference in the look of things. So do sunrise and sunset. Why, you've seen the woods look orange and scarlet, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Chris, looking abashed. "I forgot. But, I say, if there were water there, shouldn't we see it glitter?"

"Not a bit. Don't you know how the rivers in these parts run down in the cañons? Why, I've seen a dozen or two that you didn't know were there when you were a hundred yards away."

"And these may be ten miles off," cried Ned.

"Ten? Yes, quite that," said Griggs dryly.

"Ah, they're a long way off, Ned, my boy," said Bourne thoughtfully. "How far do you make it, Griggs?"

"Well, sir, I should say it's a hundred miles from here to the highest part of that peak."

"A hundred miles!" cried Ned.

"Yes, and a good sixty to the hills about the foot."

"Then we shan't get there to-day," said the doctor decisively.

"If we do half of it, sir, we shan't have done badly," replied Griggs; "but in thirty miles I fancy we shall have reached water, and be in a better country than we're in now, worse luck."

"What!" cried Chris.

"What I say, squire. We don't want to go dawdling about in pretty places. We must go yonder for rest and water, say for a day or two, but the old prospector's map won't fit in there."

"How do you know?" said Wilton sharply.

"Because if there'd been a landmark like that big peak anywhere near the city he'd have been safe to mark it down."

"Of course," said the doctor thoughtfully. "Where should you think that mountain is?"

"Don't know, sir, and I don't see that it matters to us

in what State the old temple and its treasure is. All we’ve got to do is to find the wilderness that hides it away, and we may as well make up our minds that it’ll take all the patience we can store up. But what do you say about our start, sir?”

“As soon as we have had something in the way of breakfast,” replied the doctor. “Unfortunately we can have no coffee. It seems impossible to scrape together enough fuel to make a fire.”

“Not till to-night, sir, but I think we might drink what water we like. The horses and mules will be able to get along without.”

“Yes, we might venture upon a tinful each before starting,” said the doctor.

That tinful each was the first part of the meal, and declared merrily by both boys to have quite a rattlesnaky flavour. The solid portion of the late breakfast was not appetizing.

“But never mind, squires,” cried Griggs cheerily; “we’re going to get game as we go along to-day. It’ll be roast birds for dinner if you keep your eyes open. I don’t mean for the game.”

“For what then?” asked Chris.

“The wood to cook it, my lad. We must carry the axe ready, and if we do happen to come across a few shrubs they must be loaded on top of the water-kegs, for the mule that carries them is getting to have a precious light load, and he deserves a heavy one for causing us all that trouble yesterday.”

A very short time after they were going straight for the mountain—the great peak forming their goal, and the doctor taking its bearings by compass so as to know their route if mist should hide it, and when darkness came on.

To the surprise of all, both ponies and mules stepped briskly and well, the pasture upon which they had been busy having had a wonderfully good effect. The hardy beasts seemed now to need no water, and made light of their loads, while as the stiffness suffered by the riders

passed off with movement in the warm bracing air, the difficulties and perils of the past seemed to die away.

Griggs proved to be right, too, before they had been two hours on the way, for first one or two, then a covey of the large partridge-like birds that haunted the open appeared, and as the day went on several plump additions to their stores fell to the guns.

But the wood was so far wanting, and it was not until evening was approaching that they came upon a scattered patch of trees, which grew for a long distance in a meandering way, just one here and there, and from which a sufficiency for their purpose was obtained; but the pasture was no more plentiful, and they kept on, till all at once Griggs slapped his hand down heavily upon his leg.

"Got it!" he cried.

"Got what?" exclaimed the doctor, and the boys stared.

"That idea. Can't you see, doctor? These trees have been all along on our right for quite a time."

"Yes, that's plain enough," was the reply.

"And they go right on as far as we can see, wandering in and out, but getting thicker."

"Yes, I can see all that, but I confess that I don't see what it has to do with your excitement."

"Don't you, doctor?" cried Griggs. "Well, it means this: there's been a watercourse here some time or other, and there's enough moisture underground to keep these little scrubby trees alive."

"I see. It is possible."

"As it gets farther from the hills there are fewer trees, but as we follow it up you can see they are getting thicker, and I believe that if we keep on far enough we shall come upon grass and water, perhaps a pool."

"Then we'll keep on," said the doctor, "certainly; and may you prove to be right."

Griggs did prove to be right, for when the course of the trees had been followed for about four miles, the party found themselves upon a marshy patch of a vivid green, the trees they had followed ending at the very edge. Pools

of clear water were plentiful, and the banks and swampy ground between them and the lakes were rich in deep green succulent and coarse reeds and grassy patches such as cattle delight in.

A dry slope some fifty feet above the swamp was soon selected for the temporary halt—a place which proved to be quite free from reptiles; and here the mules were unladen, the fire was lit, and the boys joined eagerly in the culinary preparations, all being eager to help in the preparation of the evening meal.





CHAPTER XVIII

PEACE AND PLENTY

“WHAT do you think of this, boys?” said Griggs, at sunrise the next morning.

“Splendid!” cried Chris.

“Glorious!” shouted Ned. “Oh, bother the old gold and the tramping through choking deserts. Come along, Chris.”

“Here, what are you going to do?” cried Griggs.

“Swell ourselves out again,” replied Chris. “I’m dried up like a stalk with all that miserable tramping, and I shan’t come right again till I’ve been in for an hour.”

“In where?”

“Why, in that big pool. You listen. You can hear me crackle with the salt and dust caked over me. I’m afraid to laugh, for fear I should crack my skin.”

“Get out! But a good wash will be a treat. I say, though, that place looks deep. You can both swim very well?”

“Oh, tidily—eh, Ned?”

“I should think so!”

“That’s all right then,” said Griggs; “but how about——”

“About what?” cried Chris, for the American stopped.

“The anacondas and alligators and snapping turtles and garfish with teeth sharp as sharks’?”

“Oh, I say,” cried Ned, with his face contracting as he

glanced at the smooth clear waters of the largest pool in sight. "You don't think there's anything of that sort in there, do you?"

"I dunno. Haven't given it a thought," replied the American.

"Come along," cried Chris; "he's laughing at us."

"Not I," said Griggs.

"Anacondas," said Chris thoughtfully. "Yes, they are the big boa-constrictor-like chaps that half live in the water, and lay hold of anything that goes in. No, it's all stuff, Ned. They don't live here; they're in South America. There's nothing to mind."

"I don't know so much about that," said Griggs. "What about alligators and snapping turtles? There's safe to be plenty of them in a place like this."

"But they wouldn't try to touch us," cried Chris. "I shall chance it."

Ned looked anxious.

"Here, I say, Griggs," he said. "No games. We want a bathe horribly. You don't think there really are any biting things in the water, do you?"

"I dunno, my lad. This is a new place altogether to me. There are plenty of vicious hungry things down in Mississippi and Florida, I know that."

"But we're not in Mississippi nor yet in Florida," cried Chris. "I say, Griggy, where are we?"

"Why, here, to be sure," replied the American.

"Don't talk stuff!" cried Chris angrily. "What part are we in?"

"I'm not a geography-book, my lad, and I don't know where we are, only that we've travelled south-west. No finger-posts up here and no lines to show where the States are divided."

"Now you're bantering again, Griggs," cried Chris irritably. "You must know."

"If you come to that, why, so must you, my lad. But I really don't know, only that we're well into the wild unsettled parts of the country, and I should say nobody had ever been here before but prospectors—chaps like

the poor fellow who came crawling to us regularly done up."

"But where should you think we are?"

"Well, I'm inclined to think that we're got well into Arizona, my lad, where the great unexplored salt deserts are."

"Very well, then, we've explored that part and come across the deserts, and got into the good land now."

"Oh, have we?" said Griggs derisively. "Why, we've only just tasted a bit of one. Do you know how big these wilds are?"

"A few miles across, I suppose—fifty or so, at the outside."

"That's mild for a guess," said Griggs. "Why, I believe there's room enough out in these wilds for us to lose ourselves and wander about for years."

"Very well, then, let's wander," cried Chris. "That's nothing to do with what we want to do here, and that's to bathe and get rid of all this sand and dust."

"Well, then, if you'll take my advice you'll keep on the shallows close to the edge, in case——Yah! Look at that!"

The boys were already looking, their attention having been caught by the rising of a little wave caused by some fish or reptile rushing through the water for a few yards before curving over, making a great splash as it disappeared.

"A big fish seizing a small one," cried Chris. "Well, that won't hurt us," and hurrying along the edge of the pool they were not long before plunging in for a good swim, to come out ready to dry themselves in the sun, and after dressing enjoying the sensation of being freed from the dust and salt which had clung to their skins.

"I say, bother the old gold!" said Ned again, as they stood gazing at the mountains half hidden by the delicate clouds of mist curling about their sides and clinging to the great peak which had formed their guide. "Isn't it lovely! Why can't we live here?"

"Because we've got something else to do," said Chris grimly. "Besides, how could we live?"

"Live? Why, the same as we did at the plantation. I believe that everything would grow here and that we could raise abundance of fruit."

"And who should we sell it to?"

"Bother! Never mind about selling it," cried Ned contemptuously. "Eat it ourselves."

"Live on oranges, eh? What stuff you talk! Ask your father what he thinks."

"But there'd be plenty of other things here to eat. We could grow corn, and graze cattle, and keep poultry. I dare say we shall come across buffaloes and deer. Then there are abundance of birds, and I dare say these fish in the pools would be good, without reckoning on the salmon."

"What salmon?" said Chris grimly.

"The salmon in the rivers that come down from the mountains over there."

"Of course!" cried Chris mockingly. "Here, let's go salmon-fishing this morning. We've got hooks and lines packed up somewhere, and I don't suppose it will take us long to find a salmon river."

Ned stared wide-eyed at his comrade, who burst out laughing.

"Oh I say, Ned, what a baby you are! I shall tell them over our breakfast everything you—— Oh! I say! Smell that?"

"Yes," cried Ned eagerly. "Coffee."

"No, no; that other smell. I know! old Griggs is frying something for breakfast. Come on."

The scene around was glorious; there was the blue sunlit sky, in the distance the purple mist and the glistening silver of pool after pool, while all else was golden green—tree, bush, and waving reed, rush and grass. To a couple of boys whose eyes had been smarting for days in the dusty glare, the country around seemed perfect in its beauty. But though they had been revelling therein, and enjoyed it to the full, now that they were refreshed by their bath all seemed as nothing compared with the film of grey smoke that arose from close by the heap of packs beyond

which the ponies and mules were grazing, half hidden by the lush rich grass which brushed their flanks.

But it was not only the sight of that slow-rising smoke, there was the odour which floated to their nostrils, and set them off running in a way which seemed to suggest that their swim had washed away all the stiffness and languor of the day before.

"Breakfast," shouted Griggs as they drew near, and his cry brought up Wilton, Bourne, and the doctor, each with his double rifle and shot-gun across his shoulder.

The change was so great after the sufferings and excitement of the past hours, that every one was enthusiastic, and the conversation became general about the future; but very soon all but one became listeners, the one being the doctor, who laid down the law as to future proceedings, giving it as his opinion that the success of the expedition, or more especially the continuance thereof, must depend upon their keeping in touch with water.

"Yes, that's right," said Griggs, as if speaking to himself.

"You see," said the speaker, "our stores must rapidly grow less, and we have to face the fact that we shall have to throw ourselves upon the resources of the country; hence to go on journeying through the deserts means failure, perhaps worse, for we may find some day that we have gone so far that we cannot retrace our steps. You follow me, Griggs?"

"Quite, sir," was the reply. "You are saying what I think, only much better. I don't want to push forward my opinions, but I know a little about these matters, having journeyed farther north years ago, and having had a good deal to do with the horrible alkali plains, as they called them."

"Exactly, and we shall always be glad of your advice and counsel," said the doctor. "Now, it seems to me that wherever we can we must keep to the mountains. It will be more arduous for our beasts, but near the high lands we may generally find water. Where there is water there are grass and trees, and where there are these we may

find food in the shape of birds and other animals, as well as provision for our ponies and mules."

"Plenty of fish in that big pool," said Chris.

"Oh!" cried Ned in protest. "We only saw one."

"But he was after another," said Chris sharply, "and that big one is sure to have plenty of young ones."

"His relatives, eh?" said Bourne, smiling.

"Of course," added Wilton, with a laugh, "and that will include the old folks as well as the young."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and you boys must try your hands at catching them whenever there is a chance. In fact, we must all bear in mind that it is urgent that we should be on the look-out for food—not in a destructive way, but so as to have the next day's supplies in hand. But now about to-day. We have excellent quarters here, the beasts are revelling in good pasture, and though I am anxious to go on I think we had better stay where we are, say for a couple of days more, not to do nothing, but to let this be the camp from which we make an expedition or two towards that peak and part of the way up its slopes, so as to determine in which direction we shall go next."

There was a murmur of assent here, and Wilton took up the debate.

"I believe," he said, "that we shall find the source of a river up there, and that then it would be wise to follow it down."

"That would take us towards the sea," said Ned's father decisively.

"Not for certain, sir," cried Griggs.

"Well, then, towards where the river joined another which ran into the sea."

"Not for certain, sir," repeated Griggs.

"Very well, then, where it runs into some good-sized lake."

"Not for certain, sir," said Griggs, so decisively that Chris laughed.

"But a river must fall into something," said Ned's father sharply, Griggs' interruptions having made him feel nettled.

"Yes, sir, of course; but in a desert country such as it is about here they fall into difficulties."

"I know," cried Chris; "Griggs means that they tumble down into those great cañons like that one on the Colorado, isn't it, where the banks are a mile deep?"

"No, I don't, squire," said Griggs firmly, "though I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we came across one of those gashes in the desert. I meant that some of the little rivers that come down from the mountains run bright and clear for a time in amongst the rocks till they get to the more level ground, and then they spread out and grow wide and shallow so that you find they're only up to your knees. A mile or two lower down they're not up to your ankles, while a bit lower there's no river at all."

"What, gone down a sink-hole?" cried Chris.

"No, squire; spread out and soaked away into the sand, which begins by looking dark-coloured and has patches of grass growing in it for a bit, and then you get farther and the sun has drunk up all the sand had not swallowed."

"But there must be pools and marshes," said Wilton.

"Pools sometimes, but where you do find one it's as salt as the sea, only a deal nastier, and if you drink any of it you find it makes you ill."

"You've had that experience?" said the doctor.

"More'n once, sir," replied Griggs, "and it aren't nice. Which way do you mean to go to-day, sir?"

"Straight for the mountains," replied the doctor.

"Humph!" grunted Griggs. "Won't get there in one journey."

"No," replied the doctor, scanning the beautiful elevation through his glass, "but I think we might do what we can in the way of selecting another camp to which we can move a day or two later."

"Yes, we can do that, sir. But what about here?"

"I should set up the tent here before we start," suggested Wilton.

"What for, sir?" asked Griggs sharply.

"It will be a big white object for our guidance on our way back."

Griggs shook his head and smiled.

"We shall take our bearings, and be able to find our camp again. The water here will do for one big mark when we're yonder on the hills. If you set up that tent with no one to mind it, the mules won't be long before they come rubbing themselves against the ropes and upsetting it, for one thing. Another is, that if a roving band of mounted Indians came along they'd be down upon it at once to see what there was worth taking."

"But surely there are no mounted Indians about here?" said Ned eagerly.

"Maybe no, maybe yes, my lad. I don't know that there are, and I don't know that there aren't. Here's plenty of room for them, and a nice country where there's water and perhaps game. Likely enough there may be Indians. For they're here to-day and a hundred miles off to-morrow, roving about in search of eatables."

"Yes," said the doctor gravely, "and the thought of the life they lead is encouraging to me."

"Encouraging?" cried Bourne and Wilton together.

"Certainly. I have been a good deal exercised in my mind about the failing of our provisions forcing us at last to turn back, but if we follow the example of the Indians there is no reason why we, so long as we have sufficient ammunition, should not be able to keep on for years if it were necessary. What one band can do, surely another can."

"That's what you think, then, is it, sir?" said Griggs sharply.

"Yes; why do you speak like that?"

"Only because I'm glad you see fully what we've got to do, sir, and are ready to do it."

"But we must husband our stores," said Bourne.

"Of course, sir," said Griggs, with his eyes twinkling. "We will, as long as they'll stop to be husbanded; but they'll shrink away to nothing at last, and we must look forward to the time when all the extras'll be gone and we shall have to live on meat and water."

"Rather starvation rations, Griggs," said Wilton, while the boys stared at one another.

"Oh no, sir. I've been through it, and it isn't half bad. You soon get used to it, and then you find out what roast meat and cold water really are—about the most delicious eating and drinking in the world. Your appetite's splendid; you can sleep like a top; and as to what you can do, it's wonderful. You never seem to be tired."

"Then you don't feel any apprehension about our having to give up for want of supplies?"

"Not a bit, sir, as long as the powder and shot last. When they're done the sooner we make for civilization the better."

"Yes," said the doctor thoughtfully. "You must be right, Griggs."

"Yes, sir, I am right," said Griggs, without a shadow of brag in his way of speaking. "I wouldn't speak out as I do if I hadn't proved it."

"How long did you lead such a life as that?" asked Chris.

"Going on for four years. Why, I've talked to you and Squire Ned here often."

"Yes, of course, about your experiences in the big north-west," said Chris; "but I didn't know it lasted so long."

"Don't you remember about his fight with the Indians, when they rode round his party?" asked Ned.

"Yes, I remember," said Chris. Then thoughtfully, "You think we shall find Indians out here?"

"No, I don't, my lad; but I feel pretty sure they'll find us."

"Most likely," said the doctor, nodding his head; "but we can beat them off. You feel, then, Griggs, that we need be under no apprehension about our stores?"

"Not a bit, sir, so long as we keep within touch of the mountains. I'd almost go as far as to say that we could do better without them. We could after a time, for it will save a lot of trouble in loading up the baggage. But they won't fail yet awhile. A man can do without tea

and coffee and sugar and pepper, and without meal too when he's obliged. We shan't want for salt, I dessay, though the less we come across that the better. We shan't fail over finding where that poor old chap made his map, on account of the eating and drinking. I was thinking about him in the night when I woke up to have a look round."

"What about him?" said Chris, for the American had stopped short.

"'Bout how long he'd been living out somewhere in these parts."

"Or some other parts," said Wilton.

"That's right, sir."

"How long had he been out here, then?" asked Ned eagerly.

"Can't say, squire; but a many, many years, for he was pretty nigh worn out, warn't he, doctor?"

"By privation principally," said Bourne thoughtfully.

"Privation had had a good deal to do with it certainly," said the doctor; "but Griggs is right, he was nearly worn out."

"With his long fight?" said Wilton.

"Principally from old age. He must have been very far past seventy."

"What?" cried Bourne.

"Oh yes, he was very old," replied the doctor quietly.

"Ay, he seemed so," said Griggs. "Old enough to be a hundred; not that he was. I'll say eighty. Well, he might easily have been wandering about in his gold hunt for twenty or thirty or forty years."

"Oh, absurd!" cried Wilton.

"P'r'aps so, sir; but look here, he went out with a party of prospectors, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And he was the only survivor?"

"To be sure; he told Lee so."

"Well, it's an old story about the parties of prospectors going out into the desert in search of gold and never coming back."

"Yes, we have heard it often."

"Then tell me this, Mr. Wilton," said Griggs sharply. "When a party goes out exploring, what sort of chaps are they?"

"A very brave, enterprising set."

"Of old men, I s'pose, sir, nearly worn out?"

"Nonsense! Able-bodied, vigorous, young and active fellows," cried Wilton decisively.

"That's right, sir. Then how many years is it since that poor old fellow was young, able-bodied, and vigorous, and started off into the desert with his party? It wasn't yesterday, I'll be bound."

"No!" said Wilton, very slowly and thoughtfully.

"He managed to live a long time out here, sir, eh?" said Griggs, smiling, "and so can we. We've got a hundred times his chance, for, as I said before, we know what he didn't."

"What do you mean?" said Ned's father.

"We know that the gold city is somewhere, and we've got his plan to work upon. Now, doctor," continued the speaker suddenly, "what do you say to making a start for the mountain to have a look round?"

"The sooner the better," said the doctor, "only let's make a stack of our stores."

"That's soon done," said Griggs, and all started to place the bales so that the mules might not investigate matters that were no concern of theirs.





CHAPTER XIX

‘DISMOUNT!—QUICK!’

“**I**SN’T it grand!” cried Chris, as he tightened the girths of his saddle during the final preparations for the start, every one being well armed, and in face of the fact that they meant to be back at the camp the same evening, burdened with nothing but a wallet containing a little food and a bottle of water.

“Isn’t what grand?” replied Ned.

“Why, riding off into a country where nobody has been before, and not knowing what wonderful discoveries we may make.”

“Oh yes, I suppose so; but I wish old Griggs had spoken out as he has now before we started.”

“What about?”

“What about? Why, our having to go on and on till all the stores are finished, and then for us to get nothing but frizzled meat to eat and water to drink. That’s a nice look-out, upon my word! Here, see if you can get my girth tightened to this hole. This brute has been eating till he’s as round as a tub.”

“So has mine. I haven’t got the girth as tight as it was last time by three holes.”

“Oh! Then you needn’t bother. I’m one hole better than you.”

“All right, then. We shall have to tighten up two or three times to-day.”

"Ready, boys?" cried the doctor. "That's right. Now sling your guns. Are you loaded?"

"Yes, father—bullet in one barrel, shot-cartridge in the other."

"Now then, mount. You follow us, and Griggs will bring up the rear."

"That's right," said Chris in a whisper. "We can make him talk to us and tell us about how he got on when he was travelling before."

The start was made, and as soon as the marshy part was cleared there was no need to ride in single file. The doctor allowed his two friends to come up abreast, and Griggs urged his pony forward to get between the boys.

"Here we are, then," he said cheerily. "Now we can have a palaver."

"About Indians," said Ned eagerly.

"Indians? Not a bit of it. We don't want any Indians. I say, nice thing to find when we get back that they had raided the camp and cleared off everything, mules and all."

"Oh, I say, Griggs," cried the boys together, "don't! It would be horrible. Why, part of us ought to stop and guard the camp."

"Either of you like the job?" said the American.

Chris and Ned leaned so as to gaze across Griggs' pony in each other's eyes.

"Bah! They won't find it, even if there are any in this neighbourhood," cried the American. "Nice country, ain't it? Rather better than the desert."

"But isn't it a pity that we are not going right up the mountain to-day?"

"Like to go all the way?" said Griggs.

"Yes, I should," cried Chris eagerly. "I want to get the glass and look round. I think I could make out the mountains on the old map if I saw them."

"Very nice if you could," said Griggs dryly. "But it's early morning yet. You wait till afternoon, and then see if you wish the same. I think you'll fancy we've had enough of it for one day, and want to get back to camp for supper."

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Chris merrily. “I’m not always thinking of eating like Ned is.”

“Eh? Oh, I say! I like that! Why, I never do.”

“Didn’t you grumble just now about the time when we should have nothing but meat and water? Here—I say—Griggs, what’s that—I mean those? There’s more than one.”

“Yes; keep quiet. More than twenty, my lads.”

“Not Indians, are they?” whispered Chris with bated breath.

“Where?—where?” panted Ned.

“Over yonder—half-a-mile away. You can just see their black heads above the grass. They’re watching us.”

“What, in that open grassy piece with those trees? Yes, I see now. I’ll canter forward and tell them.”

“No, no, sit still and go steadily on. I don’t want ’em scared. It’s a sight worth seeing. They’re getting scarce now; nearly all have been shot up in the north.”

“Yes, I know they’re getting scarce up there,” said Chris excitedly, while Ned’s eyes began to open wider and wider. “But we ought to warn my father.”

“Nay, I dare say he sees them by now.”

“Shout to him in case he doesn’t,” said Chris excitedly.

“No, no,” replied Griggs, who was shading his eyes to keep off the sun. “They’d hear us if I shouted, and be off at once.”

“But I’m afraid they’ll begin shooting.”

“Who’ll begin shooting?”

“Those Indians.”

Griggs turned in his saddle to look wonderingly at the speaker, and then his features began to relax, but grew hard again at once, and he said quietly—

“Oh, I see—shoot at us. Why, they’re doing that now, and making bulls’-eyes.”

“What do you mean?” cried Chris sharply. “What have I said? Here, Ned, he’s laughing at us.”

“That I wasn’t,” cried Griggs. “I only nearly smiled. Why, do you mean to tell me that you don’t know what those are?”

"Indians, aren't they? Blackheads or blackfeet—I don't know."

"That's very evident," said Griggs grimly. "Why, they're buffaloes—bisons, staring at us with their heads just above the grass."

"Oh—h—h!" cried Chris. "So they are."

"Then they mean beef," cried Ned excitedly.

"There, what did I say?" said Chris, laughing. "He's thinking about roast beef for dinner."

"Then he won't get any to-day," cried Griggs. "There they go; they've taken alarm."

"Oh!" cried Ned, as the black objects suddenly disappeared. "We ought to have shot one."

"They're all right," said Griggs coolly. "We know that there are buffaloes in this part of the country, and we can stalk one when we like. We don't want meat to-day. I say, boys, we've only seen them, but we know now there's something else."

"What?" cried Ned.

"Wolves."

"How do you know?"

"Always are. They follow the bison droves."

"But a great bull bison could easily kill a wolf."

"But a calf couldn't," said Griggs dryly. "They hang about after the droves so as to pull down the very young calves, and kill the mothers too, sometimes. Well, this is a good beginning, and I only hope we may find beef like this in our larder wherever we go, till we discover the old city."

"They haven't seen them," said Chris.

"Shout and tell them, then, now."

Chris gave a hail, and made the announcement.

"Where?" shouted Wilton excitedly.

"Out of sight now, sir," replied Griggs. "The grass is very high down in that hollow, but if you look towards those trees you may see what I can now, the tall grass waving as if something was plunging through it."

"I see them," said Bourne directly after.

"And I," cried Wilton. "Let's ride hard and cut them off."

But a word from the doctor checked him.

“Why not ?” he said. “We shall want the food.”

“Yes, sometime,” said the doctor. “The buffaloes will not go far from such abundant pasture, with water close at hand. We can pick up a few birds as we come back, I dare say, enough for this evening and to-morrow. I want to get on as far as we can to-day and see for a new camping-place, as we agreed.”

“That’s right, sir,” said Griggs. “If we stop to get a shot or two at those fellows they may lead us another way, and what with the shooting, skinning, and cutting up, we shall make such a hole in the morning that we must put off our exploring till to-morrow.”

“Oh, very well,” said Wilton, rather ungraciously ; “but when we do want our joints, mark my words, we shall not be able to get a shot.”

Griggs laughed and shook his head.

“Don’t agree with you, Mr. Wilton,” he said. “There goes something else.”

“Eh ? Where ?” cried Wilton.

“Through the tall grass yonder. I fancy it’s deer of some kind ; something small, but I can’t see what it is.”

“Whatever it may be,” said the doctor, “it’s running through the grass in the direction we are going. Look at the grass yonder, it’s waving as something passes through.”

But whatever it was they could not get a glimpse of it, though time after time, when they felt that the game had either been passed or had gone off to right or left, they saw the grass in motion again.

Then it stopped altogether, and the grass began to grow shorter before them, the longer beds being down to their right where the land sloped down, and they here and there caught the glint of water.

“Why, we must be following up the bed of an underground river,” said Bourne, “and this keeps breaking out from time to time, forming quite a chain of little lakes. Yes, there, look ; those must be ducks.”

“Ducks they are,” cried Griggs, as a little flock rose cackling from somewhere away to their right and skimmed

along over the top of some waving reed-beds, but far out of shot.

"Another proof that we shall not starve," said the doctor, as they rode slowly on, with the grass in places reaching to their saddle-bows. "Let's strike away to the left here," he continued. "I fancy the ground is drier. It is certainly wetter down to the right there, and the grass longer."

He was quite right, for by bearing off a little they found at the end of about half-a-mile that their progress had grown more and more easy, the grass now only reaching to their stirrup-irons, while away further to their left it was shorter still, looking quite lawn-like in the distance.

"We're a good deal higher than we were at the camp, aren't we?" asked Bourne.

"Certainly, and far off as we are we certainly seem to be approaching the mountain by a gradual slope."

"And that chain of pools and swamps is something of a river or stream that comes down from one of the valleys yonder. Hallo! look out!"

Every one present had already been put on the *qui vive* by a quick rustling in front, followed by a loud whirring sound, as some half-a-dozen birds, which they had evidently been driving before them through the long grass in which they had kept out of sight, had now found themselves too much exposed in the shorter herbage and taken flight.

"Big partridges—monsters!" cried Chris excitedly.

"Yes," said the doctor dryly; "the most monstrous partridges I ever saw, Chris. Why, they're turkeys, boy. They're making for those trees yonder across the pools, eh, Griggs?"

"That's right, sir. They'd be worth stalking too, but I don't think we could follow them through that swamp. I dare say, though, that we could get a shot at them some other day. Might perhaps as we come back."

"We'll be ready for them then," said the doctor quietly. "Now then, the ground's firm, and the grass getting shorter; let's try a canter."

He pressed his pony's sides and led off, the rest following in single file now, with the ground slowly rising, the grass getting shorter and shorter, till at the end of about half-an-hour the doctor reached the bottom of a mound, drew rein, and let his mount walk to the summit, where he halted for his companions to join him and drink in the soft cool air as yet unheated by the ardent sun.

The next few minutes were spent in sweeping the country round, and in a very short time they were pretty well acquainted with their position. For right away forward and to their left the grass grew shorter and shorter for a couple of miles, till it looked more than ever like some lawn whose soft green grew greyer and greyer till it was of a dull shimmering white.

“A great lake,” cried Chris.

“Try again, my boy,” said his father.

“’Tisn’t salt desert, is it?” said the boy.

“Breathe in the air that is coming from it, my lad.”

“Hot and dry,” cried Chris excitedly. “That’s why I was getting so warm. I thought it was from riding so fast.”

“We’re skirting the edge of the desert,” said the doctor, using his glass. “Yes, as far as I can see it is all table-land that way; the grass soon ends, and all is dusty sand with the air quivering over it as it sweeps away towards the mountain chain, while this way to the right the grass and trees seem to run up green and beautiful into the hills, which widen out into a valley.”

“Can you see water, sir?”

“Yes,” said the doctor, scanning the land to his right and away forward; “water in two places. Our course is plain enough—to keep along here at the edge of the great plain where the grass is short and the ground firm. We are on a dividing line between the bad land and the rich park-like patches and the pools and swamp. This ought to take us into the valley yonder and to one of those hills where we can camp in what must be a good hunting country. Forward!”

They cantered on, drawing rein now and then to breathe

their horses, to find that the desert land with its quivering layer of air grew more clearly marked on one side, the country more beautiful and park-like, diversified by hill and dale, on the other, and away in front the mighty peak looking as distant as ever, but with its features more plainly defined.

Twice over they came to a halt, the first time being at the edge of a narrow lake which resembled a piece cut off from a tolerably wide river, whose ends had been filled up by the growth of reeds.

Noon was long past, but the air was so fresh and invigorating and their level track so easy to follow, that the doctor decided upon pushing on again for another couple of hours, before making a final halt for refreshment, and then turning back.

This final stoppage was beneath a clump of fairly grown trees whose boughs formed a goodly shade from the westering sun, and all revelled in the beauty of the view forward as they partook of their scanty meal.

"Glorious!" said the doctor at last. "We can't do better than make our way up here to-morrow. The journey for the mules will be easy enough if we bear more to the left, and they ought to get up here by night."

The others agreed, Griggs being full of approbation.

"And two days will easily take us right up the slope of that mountain. Shouldn't wonder, if we started early enough, if we did it in one. But hadn't we better be going back now, sir?"

"Yes, at once," said the doctor. "Can you pick up our trail now and then, only leaving it when we can cut off some of the way?"

"I shouldn't wonder if I could, sir," was the reply. "I'll try."

"That's right; but we must spread out a little, and be on the look-out for a shot or two, so as to have something to cook when we reach camp."

"Partridges, father," said Chris, unslinging his gun.

"Yes," said the doctor, smiling; "we ought to get one or two of those monsters if we get a chance."

But, as Wilton had suggested, now that they wanted something in the way of game, nothing was to be seen, and they were fully half-way back and the evening coming on fast, but with the moon well up ready to give its light as the sun went down, before there was a fair chance. They had seen partridges again, and sent a flock of ducks skimming over the reeds, but in both cases they had risen far out of shot.

“We must get more into the longer grass,” said Griggs at last. “We shall get something then, and as soon as we’ve got enough we can bear off again into the short, and canter.”

It proved to be good advice, for about half-an-hour later, when they had been compelled by the thickness of the growth to proceed at a walk, Griggs, who was in front, suddenly turned in his saddle.

“Come more into line,” he said; “there is something on in front waiting to be flushed.”

The evolution was made, and the six ponies went steadily on through the dense growth with a loud rustling sound, while from time to time a glimpse was obtained of the waving green surface being agitated not far in front, plainly showing that they were driving something before them.

“Which way will they go, Griggs, when we flush them?” said the doctor.

“I don’t see any trees to the left, sir, or they’d fly for them; so I fancy they’ll rise and make for the open plain yonder. It looks quite clear, and if we don’t bring any down when they rise we ought to canter out after them and get a shot there, or ride them down.”

“Too long a task, as it’s getting so late.”

“Oh no, sir; they’re very heavy birds. But I don’t like this; we’re getting into longer grass and——down——dismount——quick, every one——quick!”

Nobody stopped to ask why, but obeyed one whom they knew to be the most experienced member of the party, and his tone of voice was so eager and intense that all thought the time had come for a good shot, as dropping

from their saddles they stood ready to fire over their ponies' heads.

"Well, where's the game?" said the doctor, after a few moments' silence.

"Here, sir," said Griggs hoarsely. "We're it if we've been seen."

"What do you mean?"

"Look yonder, sir, over the grass out towards the desert where there's that golden shimmer above the plain."

"I don't see—yes, I do. Stoop, stoop, every one, or we shall be seen, if it isn't too late."

There was a quick movement amongst the party, every head being lowered—every one stooping a little to peer over the level top of the grass, to see as it were a panorama of black figures moving along a golden band, a party of some thirty or forty mounted Indians walking their ponies in single file, as if going in the same direction as the explorers, and not a quarter of a mile away.

"Haven't they seen us, Griggs?" whispered the doctor.

"Don't know yet, sir," said the American, "but if they haven't they must be half blind. Yes, they've seen us, for certain, I should say, and they're bearing inward so as to cut us off."





CHAPTER XX

DANGEROUS NEIGHBOURS

CHRS'S heart beat fast, and as he glanced at Ned he could see that there was a peculiar look in his eyes and strain in his countenance which suggested discomfort, if not fear.

But all this was momentary. There was something else to think about beside how his companion looked, especially his father's words, for the doctor suddenly whispered,—

“Keep close everybody, and have your rifles ready when they come on. Mind, no one is to fire till I give the order, and then all together. Give them the right-hand barrels, loaded with shot, a scattering volley right into the midst. That ought to scare them and make them turn about and gallop off.”

“And if they don't?” said Wilton, in a hoarse whisper.

“Give them the bullets then, and let every one be carefully aimed, for we shall be fighting for our lives.”

“They can't have seen us,” thought Chris then, for though the Indians were drawing nearer and nearer, they did not seem to be searching the long grass as if they feared danger, but came on in a line, each man, as could be plainly seen now, with his rein lying loosely upon his horse's neck, his hands being occupied in holding a short bow with an arrow fitted to the string ready for drawing to the head and launching.

“Why, they can’t see us,” thought Chris again, for as the low-down sun struck nearly horizontally it lit up the enemies’ eyes in a peculiar way, showing their transparency, and at the same time it seemed to the boy that as they came on in line at a walk they were looking in advance of where his party were waiting.

The next minute all was made clear, for the line of Indians advanced obliquely towards the long grass till the leading man came almost in touch a couple of hundred yards in advance, when all at once there was the wild whirr of wings, and about a couple of dozen great birds sprang into the air.

The next instant there was a peculiar dull twanging sound, followed by the fall of heavy bodies, a wild yell, and the galloping off of the enemy out into the open after the retreating flock. But three of the savages reined in, leaped from their horses, and leaving them began to seek amongst the strands of the tall grass, their search being rewarded by the discovery of four heavy turkeys, two of which were quite dead, but the others kept on flapping their wings heavily, their beautiful coppery bronze plumage gleaming brightly in the sun, till a heavy blow or two gave them their quietus, when the Indians began to twist up some of the grass, to tie the birds’ legs together tightly so that a couple of the fierce-looking fellows could hang them across their ponies’ necks.

This done, amidst a good deal of grinning and gabbling perfectly incomprehensible to the listeners, the Indians mounted again and sat gazing with shaded eyes across the grassy plain, till, apparently satisfied of the direction their companions had taken, one of them uttered a deep-toned *Hugh!* and rode off, followed by the rest.

“What an escape!” sighed the doctor, after waiting till the party was well out of hearing. “It is marvellous that they did not see us.”

“They had no eyes for that, sir,” said Griggs. “They expected to find turkey, and they were too much on the watch for the birds to be looking for us. They had no suspicion of our being near.”

"But the wretches have carried off our supplies," said Ned bitterly.

"Hallo! What's that?" said Chris, as a flapping noise was heard in the grass.

He did not wait for an answer to his question, but forced his way through the grass towards the spot whence the sound had come.

"Look out," he shouted, for there was a beating of wings, and a big bird rose from close to his right hand, passing out of his reach, but not to escape, for the next moment there was a dull thud and a fall, for as it passed over him Griggs had struck at it with his rifle-barrel, breaking its wing.

The fall was followed by a repetition of the beating which had first taken the boy's attention.

"I thought that wasn't the one I heard," he cried, and pushing forward he literally threw himself upon another of the birds, lying in the thick grass and frantically beating its wings with such violence that it levelled the grass for some distance round.

"Take care," cried the doctor warningly; "they can strike very hard with their wings."

"I've found that out," grumbled Chris bitterly, as he winced from a couple of blows, but retaliated with such vigorous action by means of the butt of his rifle that the beating ceased, the great bird's head fell over, and the prize lay inert.

"Splendid!" cried Wilton and Bourne in a breath, as, hot and panting, Chris dragged his capture to where his companions stood watching the encounter.

"They did not take much pains about retrieving their game," said the doctor.

"Sign that it's too plentiful for them to need it, sir," said Griggs, laughing. "I say; they're not bad shots, to bring a lot like that down flying. Six birds out of one flock, with bows and arrows too."

"There were such a lot of them to shoot, though," said Chris, "and the birds were all quite together. I say, Ned,

look at this arrow. Gone right through the neck.—Think they'll come back to look for more, father?"

"No," was the reply. "I can just see them under the sun, riding right away. We might go on now slowly if we keep in the thick grass."

The word was given, and all mounted, but not until Griggs had followed the Indians' example of tying the two birds' legs together and swinging them across his saddle-bow, Chris's proposal to carry his own capture being negatived on the declaration that it would be much easier for two to be carried together than one.

"You'll get your supper after all, Ned," said Chris, after they had been riding slowly on through the grass as near to their trail as could be guessed, for it was still considered advisable to keep as much under cover as possible, the Indians' sense of sight being well known to be very acute.

"There, you needn't try to joke about that," was the reply, in a weary, querulous tone. "You're as fond of good things as I am."

"Never said I wasn't," cried Chris, laughing. "But I say, Griggs, we must have one of those for supper to-night, no matter how late we are."

"All right," said the American. "I begin to feel as if I can pick a bit myself; but you won't like raw turkey, will you?"

"Raw? Nonsense! We must make a good fire, and frizzle bits over the embers."

"A good fire, to show the Indians where we've made our camp?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Chris. "I never thought of that," and he was silent for a few minutes, but only to break out again with, "We shall be too far off for any Indians to see, for we've got many miles to go yet to camp."

"And we can make our fire in the shelter of the trees," added Ned. "That'll be all right. "But I say, Griggs, you ought to begin picking one of the birds at once, so as to be ready when we get back."

"To be sure," said Griggs; "capital idea. You're a nice fellow to take care of yourself out in an Indian country!"

"What do you mean?" cried Ned.

"Preparing a trail for the savages to follow."

"I don't understand you."

"What! Didn't you propose that I should begin plucking the turkey and sprinkling the feathers about as we go? Nice trail for the brutes to follow. Why, if they picked it up they'd come along at a gallop."

"Yes," said the doctor, who had heard a part of the conversation; "we shall have to be very cautious till we get right away from the district the Indians haunt."

The night was coming on fast, for the twilight which had followed the disappearance of the sun was brief; but as the evening passed away, the moon which had looked pale and wan began to grow more and more silvery, till it was dazzling in the pure bright air, casting the riders' shadows on the rustling grass and making their way easy.

The stars were beginning to glitter too, and pool after pool was passed which looked as if it were dotted with points of light.

It was a glorious ride, and not without incident. Wherever there was water the fowl which frequented the marshy pools could be heard feeding, and the wild cries of the animals which haunted the far-spreading plain came frequently to the ear, while the sharp yelping barks, or the long, low-drawn wails like those of jackals and the dismally weird snapping shout of the prairie wolf came plainly from far away where the salt bush was known to be plentiful.

Every now and then too some owl came hawking by on silent wing, fixing its great eyes upon one or other of the party as it swooped past.

Twice over Griggs paused in doubt as to their course, for the crushed-down grass trampled by the ponies was at times hard to trace in the moonlight; but he was not long in picking up the trail again, and at last the camp was reached, with everything looking just as it had been left that morning, while the mules were still grazing, apparently as hungry as ever, though a little closer observation proved

they were picking and choosing amongst the youngest and juiciest twigs.

"Hah!" sighed Ned, dropping wearily from his pony. "Now for a good fire and some of that turkey, Griggs."

"Eh? Didn't you hear what the doctor said just now when he came up alongside?"

"No," said Ned anxiously; "what? That I was not to light the fire?"

"No, nor any one else, lad. He said that no fire was to be lit to-night, and that we must all make shift with a bite of what we left in camp this morning."

"Oh!" groaned Ned, so dismally that Chris was not too weary to forget his own disappointment and laugh and chuckle with delight at his companion's discomfiture.

But that was not the only disappointment, for as soon as the ponies had been unsaddled and freed from their bits, to be turned loose for a roll and graze, Griggs, who had been to examine the provender, came back to announce that there was none to examine.

"What!" cried the boys in a breath. "Why, we left plenty for a cold supper."

"Yes," said Griggs, "but the jackals, or wolves, or whatever they were, haven't."

"You don't mean to say——" began Chris, who felt far from mirthful now.

"Yes, I do; they've been here and cleared out everything."

"But no fire, no turkey, no tea," cried Ned. "What are we to do?"

"Just as the mustangs have, my lad; have a good long drink, a roll, and then——"

"We can't graze," cried Chris.

"No, but we can take it out in sleep."





CHAPTER XXI

ON THE TRAIL

IT was horribly disappointing in their hungry and weary state, but it was no time for finding fault.

"Roll yourselves up in your blankets, boys, and go to sleep," said Griggs.

"Is that what you are going to do?" said Chris dismally.

"No," was the reply; "I'm going to have the first watch."

"First watch?" said Chris, staring.

"Yes, and your father is going to relieve me at the end of four hours."

"But—watch? What for?"

"Because there are Indians about. You don't suppose we could leave the camp unguarded at a time like this, do you?"

"I—I never thought about it," stammered Chris. "Did you, Ned?"

"Of course not. But is it necessary?"

"If you want to take care of your scalp, yes, my lad," said the American dryly.

"Oh, but——" began Chris.

"You think there's no risk, eh? Well, perhaps it's not quite so bad as that, but we don't want to wake up and find that the mules and horses have been swept off in the

night. There, lie down and sleep. Whoever has the morning watch will wake you up to a good fire and such a breakfast as will make up for your cold-water supper. Well—why don't you lie down?—Here: stop! What are you going to do?"

"Going to speak to father."

"No, no, don't disturb him. I dare say he's asleep by now."

"He can't be," replied Chris sturdily; "there hasn't been time."

"What!" cried Griggs, laughing. "Not time? Well, come with me and look; I'll be bound to say he is. But what do you want to say to him?"

Chris hesitated to answer, but the American pressed him, and the boy spoke out.

"I only wanted to tell him that I didn't want to be such a selfish pig as to go to sleep and leave him to keep watch."

"Oh!" said Griggs gravely.

"And to say that I was going to order you to wake me when the four hours are up, and I'd go on duty."

"I see," said Griggs. "Well, come along; he's over there by the packs; but promise me if he's asleep that you will not waken him."

Chris hesitated for a moment or two, and then promised unwillingly, the boys following the American softly to where the heavy breathing of three sleepers could be plainly heard.

"There," said Griggs, leading them back; "are you satisfied?"

"Yes," replied Chris. "They haven't been long going off."

"Do you know how long it takes a tired man to go to sleep, my lad?"

"No. I never noticed."

"Just about as long sometimes as it takes him to shut his eyes."

"Nonsense!"

"And sometimes not so long, for he's asleep before they're shut."

"Old Griggs is making this up, Ned," said Chris.

"No, he isn't, my lad, for I've seen it; and I tell you what I've often seen too—a man go off fast asleep on horseback. There, now lie down and get your own share."

"I wish I'd told father."

"Tell him in the morning over your breakfast, when you're eating frizzled bird. Now then, no more talking."

"I haven't done yet," said Chris stubbornly, and now feeling wonderfully wide awake. "Look here, I'm not going to have father woke up in four hours. He's more tired than I am, and you are going to wake me to take your place."

"No, I'm not, boy."

"Yes, you are. I order you to," said Chris.

"Are you boss of this expedition?"

"You know I'm not."

"Who is, then?"

"Don't ask stupid questions," said Chris irritably. "You know: father."

"That's right, and he gave the orders of the night—that I was to watch four hours before calling him, and I was to see that all was right in the camp. Now then, you're kicking up a disturbance instead of going to sleep and resting yourself so that you may be useful in the morning."

"But, Griggs——"

"You obey orders, sir," said the man sternly. "Do you want to wreck the expedition by breaking rules?"

"No."

"Then go to sleep."

"But I can't sleep now."

"Then lie down and keep awake."

"Yes, I'll do that," said Chris, spreading out his blanket. "Come on, Ned; we'll lie down and wait till he calls father, and then we'll talk to him and get him to lie down again while we take his watch. Will you?"

"Of course," said Ned eagerly.

"Hah! That's better," said Griggs. "Now you're

talking sensibly. It doesn't do to oppose your captain at a time like that. Well rolled up, both of you?"

"Yes," was the reply, from the ground where the boys were seated.

"Better lie down, my lads; you'll keep warmer. There's a chilly wind coming down from the mountains with a bite of frost in it."

"Very well, then:—there!" said Chris peevishly.

Griggs did not speak then, but stood with his rifle-butt upon the ground and his hands resting on the muzzle for a few minutes, before he began to shake.

But it was not from cold. It was with perfectly silent mirth, as he said to himself—

"I honestly believe that they were both asleep as soon as their heads touched the ground."

Then after a pause, during which he had been slowly and watchfully gazing about him in every direction, his thoughts came back to the sleepers at his feet.

"I like that," he thought, "for it was all real and plucky and true. Not a bit of sham in it. He meant it all, and he meant to go to his father when it was time for me to call him in nearly four hours' time. But nature's too strong for him. He won't wake up, and I shan't rouse him. It will be the doctor who does that."

It was the doctor, and directly after—at least, so it seemed to Chris, who opened his eyes to stare at his father, and then at the fire crackling and smoking in a sheltered spot among the nearest bushes and trees.

"Why, it's to-morrow morning," cried the boy excitedly.

"Ah, that's what you ought to have said last night, my boy," said the doctor, laughing, as he pressed Ned's side with his toe. "Come, Ned, lad: breakfast."

Ned sprang up as sharply as if he had been kicked.

"Eh? What?" he cried.—"Oh! We've been to sleep."

"Of course you have," said the doctor. "You lay down to sleep, didn't you?"

"No, father; we lay down to keep awake till it was time to call you," cried Chris.

"Ah, yes, I know. Griggs told me; but you didn't

keep awake. Now then, go and have a wash, and then come and help me do some cooking. Be sharp."

"One moment, father. Have you heard or seen any Indians?"

"No, not one. And look here; you'll be attending to the fire when you come back; don't make it up with green wood, but pick up the pieces of the dry and dead. I don't want more smoke than we can possibly help to be rising up above the trees. Now: off!"

There was water near at hand, but no time to undress for a swim, and the boys were soon back, with the stiffness produced by the previous day's exertion dying out before the bright buoyancy produced by a sound sleep in the beautiful cool, elastic air, while the feeling of ravenous appetite that began to attack them made their task of shifting wooden fresh green spits, rather than skewers, laden with pieces of bird, from place to place, where they could catch most heat from the glowing embers, one that was tantalisingly hard.

There was bread-cake, too, in the hot ashes, and water boiling in the big tin, ready for the tea to be thrown in, and very soon afterwards the whole party were restoring strength over as delicious a breakfast as could fall to the lot of hungry men and boys, who never once troubled themselves at the want of milk, a table, or chairs.

"Now," said the doctor at last, "the sooner we're off the better; so pack up."

"Do you mean to follow our yesterday's trail?" said Bourne.

"Certainly," said the doctor. "There is only that, or to go back; and we can't do that."

"Certainly not," came in chorus.

"But is it not possible to take some other line, on account of the Indians?" said Wilton.

"No," said the doctor and Griggs, almost together.

"If we strike off over the open land it means desert, and we shall be full in sight of Indians if they came near," said Griggs.

"And if we strike in through the long grass we shall go

more and more into the bed of the unseen river, with the marshes to stop us before we can get far."

"I see," said Wilton. "Off for the mountains, then. Yes, that's the only way."

Half-an-hour later the little train was steadily advancing, the mules making light of their loads, and proving by their playfulness—which took the form of a disposition to bite or kick every one of their fellows within reach—that they were thoroughly rested, refreshed, and ready for as much work as would be demanded of their sturdy legs.

A sharp look-out was kept to their left over the open country as the leading mule was steered, as he called it, by Griggs, close in to the high grass, which acted as a screen against which they would have been hardly seen; but nothing alarming appeared in the distance, and no footprints of man and horse other than their own in the soft soil showed that any enemy had crossed their trail to make for the hunting-grounds to their right.

But night came on ere the slow pace of the laden mules had covered the distance the explorers had got over by the previous afternoon, and there the little caravan was guided right into a sheltered valley to the borders of an elongated pool, where, well hidden from the plain, preparations were made for their next camp.





CHAPTER XXII

BEAR AND BUFFALO

DISTANCE is illusive in the clear atmosphere of high mountain lands, and it took two days longer than had been calculated before a position well upon the slope of the giant peak was reached—a grand shelf, covered with verdure close to where a sparkling stream gushed out of a patch of rocks and made a leap of fully a hundred feet down into a rift, along which it gurgled musically beneath a rainbow-like arch of ever-changing beauty on its way to the plain below.

A more beautiful spot could not have been selected for the camp, presenting as it did shelter, shade, a comprehensive view of the country for probably a hundred miles round, and of the valleys that ran down and opened out from the mountain side into the plains, so that the presence of enemies could be made out and favourable parts selected for finding game.

But Chris was not satisfied, and Ned expressed his disapprobation plainly to Griggs.

“I thought we were going right up to the top of the peak,” he said. “This isn’t more than a quarter the way.”

“It’s as far as we could get the mules and ponies by now,” replied the American. “What do you want to go up higher for?”

“Why, to see, of course,” cried Ned.

"You're a hard one to satisfy," said Griggs. "There's hundreds of times as much down yonder as you can see anyhow. Besides, do you know how it would be if you climbed higher?"

"Splendid."

"No it wouldn't," said Griggs. "It would be so cold you couldn't bear it."

"What, up there in the blazing sunshine?"

"Yes, up there in the blazing sunshine. That only lasts till sundown; after that ice would be forming in the water-bottles, while the wind would be so cold that you couldn't bear it. We should want bearskin coats," added Griggs meaningly, as he sheltered his eyes from the sun's glare.

He and the boys had climbed, after helping with the camping arrangements, some three or four hundred feet above the shelf, armed with the doctor's glass.

"We could keep ourselves warm enough, I dare say," said Ned surlily, for the ponies had been walked up the final portion of that day's journey so as to relieve them of their loads.

"Strikes me," said Griggs, "that this place will about do for a couple of weeks, and then we can get right round to the other side for a day or two to see what we can make out there."

"I should say we had better start right off there to-morrow," said Chris, after taking a comprehensive glance round. "How far can I see, do you think?"

"From here? Why, big things a hundred miles off, I dare say."

"Then it's all a failure, so far," said Chris; "there's no sign of the mountains on the map. This is not the right part."

"I didn't expect it would be," said the American coolly.

"Then why did we come?" cried Chris.

"Just to make sure, my lad. That's the sort of thing we shall have to do: keep on trying, and always expecting we are not right."

"Oh!" cried Ned impatiently.

"Ah, you may 'Oh,' my lad, but that's the way to succeed. We shall go about to hundreds of places before we've done, and out of those hundreds there's only one can be right, and it isn't natural to expect that it will be ready for us at the start. There's no hurry."

"No hurry?" cried the boy, staring.

"Not a bit. You chaps are a long way off twenty yet, and if you find the gold city before you're seventy you'll do well."

"Hark at him!" cried Chris merrily. "Griggs turned philosopher. What about you then? You're past thirty."

"Ever so much," said the American, "but I don't mind if I never find it. This life's quite good enough for me."

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't want to find the old city?" cried Chris.

"No, of course not. I should like to find it, my lads, and be a rich man; but I shan't break my heart if we never go near the place. We shall have travelled half over America and seen plenty of the country. That's good enough for a man who only wants to live."

"You're a rum chap, Griggs," said Chris.

"I am, my lad, but I can't help it. Now, let's see: we came up here to see what there was to be seen, and you wanted to go up higher."

"And you said we should want bearskin coats."

"To be sure I did," without moving a muscle. "Well, there's one over yonder."

"A bearskin coat?" cried Ned. "Nonsense! Bearskin coats don't grow on trees."

"Thank you for the information," said Griggs, "but tell me something else; I knew that."

"Tell us something else," cried Ned. "A bearskin coat on the mountain side! Where?"

"Over yonder, I tell you, with the gentleman it belongs to wearing it. A splendid fit too, I should say, but it's too far off to make sure."

The boys involuntarily cocked their pieces, as Chris said excitedly—

"A man in a bearskin coat—an Indian?"

"Oh no. Can't you see him?"

"No! Where?"

"Look yonder across that bare slope that glistens in the sun as if the rock were granite."

"Yes, I see where you mean—a little higher up than we are."

"That's right. Now, just above it there's a patch of green running up to the fir-trees, all low bushes sprinkled about with the rocks between."

"Yes," said Chris, "I can see that too. Well?"

"Look, look, Chris," cried Ned; "I can see it now—there, just crossing from one lot of bushes to another. There it goes."

"Yes, I see now. Why, you mean wool, Griggs. It's a mountain sheep.—No, it isn't," cried Chris excitedly; "it's a bear."

"Yes, all alive, oh! and in his skin coat."

"And quite beyond reach, unless we stalk him. I say, Griggs, how lucky! Is that a grizzly?"

"Oh, no; they're twice as big. That's only a brown bear."

"But is he coming after our mules?"

"Not he. He's hunting for wild fruit—berries and things of that sort."

"Then it's not a dangerous one?"

"Not if you leave him alone. He'd show fight, though, I dare say, if you went after him."

"Let's climb higher up and get above him. We can easily get a shot at him then," said Chris.

"Do you want his skin?" said Griggs.

"No."

"Well, you wouldn't care about eating him, though bear ham isn't bad."

"Oh, we don't want to eat him," cried Ned, watching the movements of the brute eagerly.

"You don't want his fat to make bear's grease for your hair, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'd leave him alone. We've plenty of ammunition now, but we don't want to waste any."

"But suppose he had been a grizzly?" said Chris, bringing the glass to bear on the distant animal.

"If it had been a grizzly I should say the best thing would be to let him alone, and the same with a cinnamon, for they're very dangerous beasts. If either of them came smelling after the mules or ponies of course it would be a different thing. There wouldn't be room enough for him and us too on the same mountain side. Well! he's gone, hasn't he?"

"Yes, right up amongst the fir-trees."

"Ah, he'll be much safer there," said Griggs. "You fellows would be tempted to have a shot at him if he came within reach. Now then, lend me the glass."

The binocular was handed to him, and while the two lads stood watching the woodland patch where the bear had disappeared, in expectation of its coming into sight again, the American stood sweeping the horizon and then bringing the glass to bear upon the wondrous view in every direction where he could bring mountain, valley, hill, and plain into the field of the glass.

He had turned slowly till he was gazing in the direction from which they had come, leaving what looked like a band of deep green, to bring the glass to bear upon the pale ash-coloured desert part, which rapidly brightened into silvery grey, and from that became like the sea, half hidden by a soft haze which died away into the sky-line.

Quite ten minutes must have passed away, the boys having been too much occupied with the bear to heed their companion, when Ned said in a disappointed tone—

"Gone! I should have liked to shoot that bear."

"And had his skin," said Chris. "But look at Griggs," he added, in a whisper; "he can see something.—What are you looking at?" cried the boy, aloud.

"That patch far away over the salt plain. You can't see it with the naked eye.—Yes: I can, but it only looks like a shadow. Here, try the glass."

He handed the binocular to the boy, who looked but could see nothing till his companion had given him a hint

or two to follow an imaginary line upward from one of the eminences below.

Chris caught the object sought then.

"Yes," he cried, "I see. Why, it's a herd of buffalo!"

"Try again," said Griggs.

"Yes: a herd of buffalo," said Chris, lowering his glass and trying to fix the object with his eyes. "I can see it without the glass. Just like a cloud-shadow in the glistening, heaving plain, and moving slowly. I shouldn't have thought that buffalo would be seen on a dry place like that."

"Let me look," cried Ned, and after a try or two he caught the object visible through the glass.

"Yes, buffalo," he said, "and they're moving slowly."

"Coming this way?" said Griggs.

"I can't hold the glass steadily enough to make sure. Yes, I can see now; they're not coming straight for here, but they seem to be sloping across as if to get to the rich grass. That must be it, I think."

"Very likely," said Griggs quietly. "Hunting."

"Yes, hunting for grass," said Chris. "Let's have another look, Ned."

He caught the glass and took a long look at the dimly-seen distant patch on the plain, to cry decisively without lowering the instrument—

"Yes; you're quite right, Ned. Why, they must be miles away. I should never have seen them. What eyes you have, Griggs!"

"Been used more than yours have, lad, and that has made them a bit keener, I suppose. Try again, and see whether you can see buffalo."

"Yes," said Chris, after a long pause, "buffalo, and they're coming what you call it—diagonally across the country."

"That's right," said Griggs; "but they're not buffalo."

"What then? They're too big to be wolves."

"Yes," said Griggs coolly; "it's a big band of mounted Indians. Come down, quick."

The news they had to carry was too important to

admit of delay, and the little party hurried down to camp, where fortunately as soon as the doctor had brought the glass to bear he was able to announce that the Indians were not visible from the sheltered nook that had been chosen on account of the trees and rocks around.

"It's fortunate for us that they have no telescope in their civilization," said Bourne.

"Ah, but they have far sharper eyes than we have, sir," said Griggs. "What do you mean to do, doctor?"

"Send you up above again with the glass while we get the animals together ready for a start if it should prove necessary. The enemy are miles away yet."

"Yes, sir, and it's hardly likely that they will come up here unless they see us or hit upon our trail. What do you say to the boys taking the glass up higher? You'll want me."

"Very well," replied the doctor. "Go up, boys, and while one keeps his eyes upon their movements, the other can act as messenger and come and tell us whether the situation gets better or worse."

The two lads started at once, eager to undertake the task like men, but in five minutes they were back like boys.

"What is it?" said the doctor eagerly. "Are the Indians coming on?"

"No, father," said Chris, hesitating, for he stopped short, and Bourne looked anxiously at his son.

"You two have not been disagreeing?" he said sharply.

"No, father, not disagreeing," said Ned, "but——"

"Come, out with it," cried the doctor sternly. "Why have you both come back?"

"We've come back for orders, father," said Chris, with a sharp look at Ned.

"I thought I had given you full explanation as to what I wish you to do," said the doctor.

"Not quite, father. You left something out."

"What is it? Quick; we have no time to spare."

"You didn't say which of us was to have the glass and do the looking out."

The doctor uttered a low angry sound which had he been a dog would have been called a growl, before saying firmly—

“Ned is to use the glass, and you are to be messenger, for your words and tone say plainly enough that you have been stickling for your right to the glass, when you should at such a time of emergency have been ready to give up for the sake of all. Off with you.”

“Serve you right,” said Ned, as they climbed quickly up towards the place from whence they had first seen the Indians. “If it had been my father’s glass I’d have given up in a moment instead of laying claim to it.”

Chris was silent, and involuntarily he touched both of his cheeks, as if to feel whether they were as hot outside as they were in.

He found them hotter, and they grew hotter still by the time they had reached their look-out, creeping to it during the last fifty yards and keeping behind stones and bushes and every other bit of cover in their way,

“Wo-ho!” cried Chris cheerily then, as he lay on his chest looking down towards the salt plain, with the nettled feeling dying out fast. “Come on; you can see capitally from here.”

“Oh!” cried Ned sharply.—“Here, catch hold.”

As he spoke he held out the glass.

“What’s the matter?”

“Something in my right eye.—I can’t see.”

He was rubbing it violently, and it certainly looked red and inflamed.

“Got something in it?”

“Yes, a fly or a bit of dust, or else I’ve rubbed it too hard. You must look out, and I’ll take the messages.”

“Father’s orders were that you should use the glass and I was to take the messages.”

“Yes, I know,” cried Ned irritably, “but who’s to use a glass with a fly in his eye?”

“Lie down and turn over. I’ll take it out with a bit of grass,” said Chris gruffly.

"No, no, catch hold of the glass and don't waste time. I shall be able to rub it out directly."

"Better let me wipe it out gently with the strand of grass. I shan't hurt you."

"Yes, you will. Eye's such a tender part. I know; I'll pull the lid up and look at the sun. Then it'll water horribly, and wash the fly away."

"No, it won't," said Chris.

"What!—How do you know?"

"Because it isn't a fly."

"What!" cried Ned, whose cheeks were scarlet, as much as could be seen for one hand held over the closed eye.

"You heard what I said," cried Chris. "It isn't a fly."

"What is it, then?" said Ned, who kept on rubbing hard at the inflamed part. "A bit of grit or dust?"

"No, it's a fib, and it's in both your eyes."

"What?"

"There, don't keep on whating about it. I can see it quite plainly."

"Don't talk nonsense," cried Ned hurriedly. "Can't you see how it hurts me?"

"Yes; but you needn't have told a cram about it."

"What should I tell an untruth for?" cried Ned hotly.

"Because you wanted to cheat me into using the glass because you thought I was hurt and disappointed."

"I tell you one of my eyes smarts horribly."

"Of course it does—stuffing your knuckles into it and rubbing like that. There, focus the glass and look out."

"I can't see clearly with my right eye, Chris, honour bright. Catch hold."

"If a fellow tells you a fib once, you don't believe him next time."

"What do you want me to say to make you believe me? It does hurt, really."

"Say there was no fly in the case, to begin with."

"Will you use the glass if I do?"

"If you can make me believe that you can't see well."

"Look, then," cried Ned, and he dropped his hand, to open his right eye, which was quite bloodshot. "Now, is it likely that I can see steadily with that aching and watering so that I'm half blind?"

"No," said Chris quietly, and he took the glass and began to focus it on a distant object. "Now, own up; you did rub that hard on purpose?"

Ned was silent.

"I'm going to give you the glass back," cried Chris.

"No, you're not; and you're going to have a good look out. But I say, mind; don't let the sun shine on the glass, or the Indians may see the flash. Pull out the sun-shades."

"I have," said Chris, taking a long look out in the direction of the enemy.

"See 'em?"

"No. All's clear there."

"Take a good long sweep round and keep watching till you find out where the Indians are. I'm going down to the bottom of the fall to bathe my eye. It is bad."

"Make haste, then."

"All right. Call or whistle when you see them. I shall hear you."

Chris nodded and grunted, and then went on examining every part of the plain below, but without result, and he thought and muttered to himself the while.

"He needn't have told a fib over it. Now, I wonder where those red niggers are.—He might have known that I should see through him at once.—A nigger can't be red. That's stupid.—It was rather nice of old Ned, though. I'm afraid I shouldn't have done as much for him.—They must have gone in amongst the grass and trees somewhere about there. I wish I could see them. But I don't think they're after us—only hunting."

He lay stretched out on his chest, slowly moving the glass so that he could sweep the edge of the plain; but the time went on, and the mounted party might, after all, have been a cloud-shadow for all the sign that he could

see, and at last he began to grow weary and think of whistling to Ned to come up to him.

"He ought to have been back again by now."

The words had hardly been muttered before Chris started, for a hand was laid upon his leg.

"See 'em?"

"No. I was just going to whistle. How's your eye?"

"Getting all right again now. But you ought to be able to see the enemy. Have you looked well?"

For answer Chris began to shuffle himself back, moving on hands and toes till he was level with Ned.

"Looked well? Of course. Here, you catch hold and have a good look yourself.—Ah! Don't you say another word about that eye, or we shall fall out. I know: you've bathed it well, and it's ever so much better. Catch hold, I say."

Ned took the glass without a word and crept up to the stone which had sheltered the observer, and there was silence for a few minutes, during which Chris's patience became exhausted.

Then he cried—

"You ought to have seen them by this time. What are they doing?"

"Cooking," said Ned laconically.

"What!" cried Chris in astonishment.

"Well, I'm not sure they're cooking, but they've made a fire."

"Where—where? I say: no nonsense. Can you really see them?"

"No, but I can see the smoke of a fire curling up, and their horses are grazing just at the edge of the forest part where the long grass begins."

"Your eye must have grown worse and worse," said Chris, with grim humour, as he crawled up alongside of his companion. "It must be very bad indeed, or you couldn't see all that. Let's have a look."

"Keep your head down, mind," said Ned, handing the glass.

"Oh, that's all right; they couldn't tell heads from stones at this distance. You must have been dreaming, Ned; I can't see smoke or horses."

"You're not looking in the right direction; bear round more to the left."

Chris made the object-glass of the binocular describe the segment of a circle, and then after another look he gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"I never thought to look so far this way," he said, as softly as if he was afraid of being heard.

"You can see them, then?"

"Yes, and the Indians too; dozens of them, I think. Here, catch hold."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell them down below, and see what they mean to do."

The glass was passed into Ned's hand with a warning not to lose sight of the enemy again, and then Chris shuffled back and downward for a few yards, and then hurried down to the camp by an easier way of travelling than crawling on hands and toes.

He was not long in doubt as to what was to be done, for the doctor gave his orders at once, all hands setting to work to drive in the mules, which were rapidly loaded up, Chris being sent back to rejoin Ned and return from time to time with any news worth communication.

He descended twice to announce that the fire was burning still and the Indians' mustangs still grazing, there being no suggestion of movement, and as soon as possible the little mule-train was once more in motion, the doctor making for a great gully a quarter of a mile beyond in the mountain side, a rift which opened into one of several by which they hoped to get round in time to the further side of the peak, though the way was long and the impediments many—not that this was minded, for every impediment partook in some way of a screen from the enemy behind, while the way was so rocky that the trail left was of the slightest kind.

Camp that night there was none. There was a short


halt or two, but they journeyed on for mile after mile by moonlight, and it was not till morning was well advanced towards mid-day that a suitable gully was found, offering all they needed in the way of water and pasturage, joined to a good look-out place for danger, which could only come to them from below, while the travellers had opened out to them an entirely fresh panorama of mountain and plain, any portion of which might contain the object for which they aimed.





CHAPTER XXIII

A BIVOUAC

“ H, I say, Griggs, isn't this a lovely place!” said Ned that evening just before sundown, as they sat beside a glowing wood fire, waiting for the sufficient cooking of the bread-cakes that had been made. Griggs was combining the duties of watch and cook ; the animals were grazing contentedly ; the rest of the party were sleeping just where they had wearily thrown themselves down after their long journey—all save Ned. He had woke up a few minutes before, to sit staring about him, wondering where he was, and with a vague notion in his head that the setting sun, whose horizontal rays were searching the gully to its deepest depth and staining the sky with the most glorious tints wherever they could rest upon a fleecy cloud, was rising, and that the odour that saluted his nostrils was given off by the breakfast cakes.

Griggs was busy raking the glowing ashes over one of those cakes, and as he did not seem to hear, Ned glanced at where Chris lay with his head upon a doubled-up blanket, and repeated his question, which this time brought forth a reply.

“Yes ; it's beautiful enough, my lad, but not the place we want.”

“You haven't had a good look round yet,” said Ned.

“Quite good enough to satisfy me that the map was not made here.”

Ned was silent for a few minutes, and then he said suddenly—

“Yes, it’s going down, and it will soon be night. I was puzzled at first. I thought it was morning. It all comes through lying down at such an unnatural time.”

“Ah, you mustn’t expect to go on in the regular way when you’re travelling, my lad,” said Griggs, “but get your bit of sleep when the chance comes.”

“I suppose so,” said Ned; “but it was ever so long before I could go off, though I was as tired as a dog. Chris was just as bad, but he’s sleeping soundly enough now.”

“No, I’m not,” said Chris quietly. “I’m wide awake, listening to what you say, and smelling the cakes. Are they nearly done, Griggs?”

“Want another quarter of an hour, and then I shall make the tea.”

“Then I shall go and bathe my face,” said Chris. “That’ll freshen me up. Will you come?”

This was to Ned, who rose at once, and they walked off together towards where a little stream came gurgling and splashing down from the heights above.

“They sleep well enough,” said Chris, with a side wag of the head.

“Yes; but I couldn’t. I say, shall we have to watch to-night?”

“No, I think not. I’m sure we shall have our turn to sleep till morning.”

“That’s right. I know I shall go off like a top. But I say, look at the sky and those fir-trees up there.”

“Lovely,” said Chris. “Some parts are so bright, all red and orange, and others look quite purple and black. It keeps changing so fast too, that the black shadows seem to move.”

“Yes; that’s what I thought more than once as I lay there before you woke. It was just as if something was creeping about under the boughs.”

“Not an Indian spy on all fours, was it?” said Chris quickly.

"Nonsense! He wouldn't have shown himself like that."

"Wasn't a wild beast?"

"Of course not. If it had been it would have scared the mules and ponies. No, it was only a shadow creeping along, and I suppose, after all, I wasn't quite awake. Now then for that water. It's sure to be fresh and cold, and will wash all the sleepy feeling away."

Ned was quite right. The water had come tumbling down from somewhere high up the peak, and felt quite icy as they lay down upon their faces amongst the stones and scooped it up out of a little moss-grown rock-pool for a few minutes, before rising up to dry their faces, feeling bright and elastic once more and wonderfully ready for the evening meal, the preparations for which sent forth another scent far more attractive than that which came from the ferns which grew in every crevice of the rocks, and the pines whose aromatic resin shed a fainter perfume now that the heat of the sun had died away.

So beautiful was the soft gloom in the valley, so delicious the warm glow above, about the summit of the peak, that every one looked content and dreamy, as they sat almost in silence about the camp-fire and partook of their welcome repast.

"My turn to-night, Lee," said Wilton suddenly. "I don't think we shall be disturbed—do you?"

"No; I feel sure that we got away unseen, and in an hour it will be so still that you can hear the slightest sound."

"And so dark that an enemy could not find us."

"Till the moon rises," said Bourne, "and then I come on. I say, doctor, you're going to have as idle a time as the boys."

"And I'm sure father wants it," said Chris sharply; "he nearly works himself to death."

"And never felt better in my life," said the doctor, with a pleasant laugh. "This mountain air is glorious after the work in those dreary salt plains. But thank you all the same, Chris, my boy; you'll take care that I am not quite worked to death, eh?"

"You won't let me," said the boy quickly.

"No," replied the doctor. Then changing the subject, he turned to Griggs. "Just a word with you, neighbour," he said. "You feel pretty confident about to-night, don't you?"

"Yes; we'll have a good rest, and to-morrow——"

"Well, what about to-morrow?" said the doctor, for the American paused.

"Strike right off to the south."

"Why?" said Wilton sharply.

"Because, grand as all this part is, it won't do. A man wouldn't dry up with starvation and thirst in such a country as this, but get fat and lazy. We're not anywhere near the map land yet."

"I'm afraid not," said the doctor; "but the climate is perfect. One would like to settle here, for some things."

"One?" said Bourne. "I know two."

"Three," said Wilton.

"All of us," cried Chris.

"I didn't speak," said Griggs dryly.

"No; but you said you liked the place if it wasn't for the Indians," cried Ned.

"Ah, I wasn't thinking about the gold then, my lad."

"The gold!" cried Bourne contemptuously. "What is the gold, after all, but so much yellow metal?"

"That's right enough, sir," said Griggs, "but precious——"

"Precious!" said Bourne, with more contempt in his tone. "A fancy word."

"I hadn't finished what I meant to say, sir," said Griggs.

"Finish then," cried Bourne. "I don't believe you are a slave to the lust for gold."

"Slave, eh?" said Griggs merrily. "Britons never shall be slaves, as you sing—nor Murricans neither. No, sir. I was going to say precious useful, when you cut me short."

"I beg your pardon, Griggs."

"Granted, sir. I was speaking as a man who has toiled for years and years to get a decent living by his plantation,

and I must say, after all my disappointments I should like to drop all at once upon that gold city where the stuff's lying waiting to be carted away."

"Yes," said the doctor; "after all our lost labour it would be pleasant."

"I don't want to wear gold chains and rings, and to keep carriages," continued Griggs, "but I should like to have enough of the yellow stuff to put in a bank, and one might do a good deal of good if one made a pile."

"Yes, I quite agree with you," said the doctor. "We all do, and we'll work till we find it."

"Of course," cried Wilton; "but I don't like that striking off south to-morrow; why should we do that?"

"It means getting clear of the Indians," said Griggs, "and into a more likely part."

"But we should have to go right across that desert yonder. I could see it stretching away to the horizon from one point we passed to-day."

"So did I, sir," said Griggs.

"Then why not keep hugging the mountains?"

"Or letting them hug us, Ned," whispered Chris.

"Didn't use the glass when you looked out over the salt plain, did you, Mr. Wilton?" said Griggs.

"No; there wasn't any need. I could see nothing else but one vast alkali plain."

"That's a pity, sir," said the American.

"That's what I say, and I propose that we keep on in the mountains till we can see a place likely to be that we are looking for."

"Look here, gentlemen," said Griggs, "I'm Amurrican, and I speak with a slow sort of drawl which comes nat'ral to me. You don't give me time. I've got a lot more to say about that look-out and the glass, only—snip-snap, you cut my speech right in two."

"I'm very sorry, Griggs," cried Wilton. "Did you use the glass up there?"

"Up there, and several other places too. That's why I asked the doctor here to let me carry it."

"Well, and what did you see?" cried Wilton.

"Nothing, till we got to that highest part."

"And then?"

"Why then, right away south where the salt plains seemed to come to an end——"

"Ah!" cried the doctor.

"I could see just a line of faint clouds or shadows."

"Yes, clouds," said Wilton—"shadows."

"Nay, it warn't," said Griggs. "Clouds and shadows miles away—a hundred, perhaps—seen through this clear air look like clouds and shadows."

"Of course," said Wilton.

"Blackish or greyish. These didn't."

"How did they look then?" said Bourne.

"Like mountains, sir; just that beautiful, wonderful, soft, pale pinkish blue. We were very high up, it was as clear as clear, and I don't say how far it was off; most likely a hundred miles away, perhaps two; but there they were, a long line of 'em, some high and some low. Mountains, and no mistake, and that's where we ought to go."

"Right across that scorching desert?" said Wilton.

"Yes, sir. It won't be nice, but we'll take plenty of water."

"And risk the rattlesnakes?"

"Yes, sir, and leave the Indians to themselves here," said Griggs. "They may have this part and welcome. We don't want it. What do you say, doctor?"

"That we'll have a good rest to-night, and climb to-morrow morning as high above us as we can to get another glimpse of your mountains, Griggs, and then map down our course by the compass and start, after making the best preparations we can. Have you anything more to say against the plan, Wilton?"

"Not a bit," cried the latter. "I didn't know that Griggs had got another range of mountains up his sleeve. There, I'm a lazy one, and I can't help longing to loaf about in a beautiful place like this. I should like to stop and shoot and explore. The place is lovely."

"Wait till we've got the gold, sir," said Griggs merrily,

“and then I’m with you. Nothing I should like better than to stop about here if Mr. Lo! the poor Indian, would leave us alone. But he wouldn’t, I know of old, and I’ve a great objection to standing still for him to make a target of me and stick me as full of arrows as a porcupine. Say, I wonder we haven’t seen any of those gentlemen, and those black and white fellows with the feathery tails.”

“The skunks!” cried the doctor. “No, nor do we want to. Then now for a good rest. Sleep, boys, and ‘pay attintion to it,’ like Barney O’Reardon. This moss will feel like feather-beds to-night. My word, how dark it has grown while we have been talking! Good-night, every one. I’m half asleep now.”

Five minutes later he was quite, and the rest, saving the watch, were rapidly following his example, the only sounds heard being the distant hoot of an owl, the musical trickling of falling water, and the crop, crop of the grazing beasts.





CHAPTER XXIV

A NIGHT VISITOR

CHRIS LEE'S bed that night was a contrivance of his own. It was between two long pieces of rock, a narrow passage which, after taking the axe to lop them off, he filled full of aromatic pine branches. These lay close and were elastic and yielding. Over them he stretched a blanket, upon which he rolled another piece of rock, which filled up one end of the narrow passage, and there, snugly protected at head and sides, was the delightful couch for a wholesomely tired lad, only wanting another blanket to cover him if he felt chilly, or to be ready to throw off if he found it warm.

Silence, darkness save for the glittering stars on high, sweet pure air, and an excellent appetite for sleep, there was all he could desire, and after laying his rifle and revolver ready and lifting his cartridge-pouch and hunting-knife a little over the rocks to prevent them from making dents in his sides, he said good-night to those near, let his head sink down, gazed for a few minutes at a brilliant star in the zenith which his father had told him was Aldebaran—one which he recollected well from its unscientific name—the Bull's-eye, he closed his own and began dreaming at once, but not pleasantly. The fact was that he had eaten a very hearty supper and lain

down to sleep very soon afterwards, two rather foolish things to do if a calm and restful sleep be sought.

Chris did not know why it was—the doctor told him afterwards—but he began to dream soon afterwards of rattlesnakes. Not of such as he had seen on the rocky slope, the largest of which did not exceed six feet in length, but of dreamland rattlesnakes, monsters of twenty feet long, and with bony tails which kept up a constant whirr previous to their owners striking at that which they meant to destroy.

It was evident in the dream that they did not mean to destroy him, for though they hovered over him with their heads playing up and down upon their elastic necks, while their eyes glittered and their forked tongues darted in and out of the opening in their jaws, they did not strike, only kept him in a state of horror and suspense, till they made way for one of the porcupines that had been named at supper-time. This came quietly up to the foot of his bed, and walked up from his boots to his knees, with its black and white quills lying down as smoothly as if they formed so much excessively coarse hair. But then as the creature continued its walk, to be soon upon the boy's chest, it seemed to get into a violent passion, setting up its quills at all angles and rattling them together till it seemed about to dash at him. But instead of doing anything obnoxious it suddenly disappeared before the advance of a skunk, which came trotting up his body from his feet, just after the same fashion as the porcupine, but looking fiercely aggressive, in spite of the beauty of its clean, glossy, black and white fur. Its eyes gleamed and sparkled; it showed its glistening sharp white teeth, and waving its erect tail, which curved over its back like a squirrel's, it twitched in the same way, and seemed every moment about to make a rush at the boy's face to inflict one of its dangerously poisonous bites, while the twitching tail threatened the discharge of the horribly offensive fluid which will send a determined dog yelling plaintively, as, completely cowed, it beats a retreat.

It seemed an hour of expectancy for what did not come off, and all the time the sleeper lay half conscious in the painful experience, telling himself that it was all fancy, for it was only a dream.

This was just as he was about to recover full consciousness, for the skunk gradually died away from where it had seemed to be standing upon his chest, and Chris lay wide awake with his heart beating, painfully wide awake now, and with every nerve on the strain, as he listened and tried to make out the meaning of a strange heavy breathing mingled with a sniffing, snuffling which came from somewhere at the back of his head.

Chris's first thought was of springing up out of the trough-like bed-place he had selected and escaping by the foot; but before he could put this into effect there was a rustling sound on the big piece of rock he had jammed in behind his head, and though he could see nothing he could feel that something had stepped up on to the stone and was bending over him; the snuffling breathing grew louder, and, to his horror, he felt a puff of hot breath full in his face.

There was no springing up now. An icy feeling chilled him, and he lay perfectly motionless, unable to stir, and feeling as if he had suddenly sunk into another dream—a nightmare this, by which he was completely fettered.

His rifle lay on one side, loaded; his revolver was on the other, and within reach of his hand; but he could not lift a finger, only stare upward with his eyes fixed upon the stars, which now seemed to be eclipsed by something dark passing between his face and them and remaining perfectly motionless for a few seconds. Then it passed onward and he could see the stars again, conscious the while that whatever the creature might be that had visited him it was now standing or sitting upon the long rock to his left, breathing hard, with its head very near his own, and that, apparently dissatisfied with its position, or uneasy, it raised itself up and stepped over to the other side of the bed, forming what looked faintly like a black arch before the hind legs followed the fore and it began

to shuffle about uneasily upon the rock to the boy's right. Then there was a scraping sound, and something fell with a thump on to the listener's chest and slipped down between the rock and his ribs.

Chris's heart had ceased its heavy beating, but at this point it gave a tremendous bound which seemed to give him a momentary feeling of resolution and strength; but momentary only. He could not stir even now, only think, and listen to the creature upon the rock as it uttered a peculiar whining sound, followed by a deep grunt.

Then all was still, as if the animal had been slightly alarmed and was now listening.

"If I stir," thought Chris—for he knew what his visitant must be—"if I stir it will seize me with its claws and bury its teeth in my throat. Oh, it is hard!"

For he knew what had happened: the bear had in changing its position upon the long piece of rock disturbed the revolver lying there, and knocked it off on to the sleeper's chest, from which it had glided down between his ribs and the rock to lie close to his hand, where he could not seize it for his defence without rousing the animal to an attack before he could cock the pistol and fire.

The position was horrible, for Chris felt that the monster must be a grizzly, one of the fiercest and most powerful beasts that roam the forest, and though so much help was close at hand, it seemed to the boy that it might as well be a mile away, for he dared not—no, not dared, but simply could not—utter a sound.

How long this agony lasted he could not tell, but all the time he felt a strange combination of sensations, for it was as if his body was turned to ice, his head was on fire, and hot and cold together he was melting away.

He could see dimly the bulky dark figure of his visitant, but he judged that it could see him plainly, for it kept on moving about uneasily, and twice over changed its position from one rock to the other, bridging them over, and then sitting up as if listening, before coming down softly on all fours again, to stretch out its neck and begin sniffing at him from end to end.

At last, when a horrible feeling of faintness was creeping up from head to brain, a thrill ran through the boy, for a great paw was stretched out, touched him on the breast, and he felt the claws catch in the right side of his jacket as he was lifted up a little with a strange scraping sound against the rock, and something rolled over on to his chest as he was lowered down again, and then rolled back against his right hand.

The shuffling sound began again, and as if to claw him out of the narrow trench-like place in which he lay, the bear reached out once more, thrusting its great paw down between him and the rock, and with the claws right under him began to lift him out.

Chris felt himself rising slowly, and knew that the next thing would be that he would be seized by the animal's teeth and slowly carried off to his lair.

But a change had come over the lad in those moments, ever since the first movement had sent something on to his chest to roll back against his hand. For that something was the revolver, about whose butt Chris's fingers closed, and as the bear's shuffling had raised him up there was a *click, click* of the lock, a movement of the boy's wrist which directed the muzzle of the little piece upward, and then in an agony of desperation his right finger pressed the trigger and there was a sharp echoing report, followed by a furious yell and crash which was followed by a call for help, and the voice of Wilton.

"Who fired that shot?" he shouted.

"I did," gasped Chris, who had scrambled to his feet, trembling in every limb.

"Who called for help?" shouted Griggs.

"I! Help!" came again.

"That you, Bourne?" said the doctor.

"Yes," came in a choking voice as of some one being suffocated.

"Oh, it's father!" shrieked Ned, and he rushed in the direction of the sound, just as there was a snarling, worrying sound and the breaking of wood as if a heavy body was rushing among the trees.

"Ah!" came in Bourne's voice, loudly. "No, my boy, not hurt, but I thought I was gone."

The speaker was the centre of a little group now, two of whom struck matches, and Wilton produced a lanthorn, which was lit and held up, to disclose the face of Bourne, covered with blood, and his jacket hanging down below his waist, literally ripped up.

"Help him to lie down," said the doctor anxiously. "Now, old fellow, tell me, where are you wounded?"

"Only in my jacket, I hope," was the reply, given cheerfully enough. "Who shot the brute?"

"I did," said Chris.

"You?" cried Griggs. "Then it was not you, Mr. Bourne?"

"I? No! I was woke up by the shot, and coming to see, when I was knocked down by the brute. It fell on me, pinning me to the ground, kicking and struggling the while. I thought I should have been smothered. Is this its blood all over me?"

"Yes, if you are not torn."

"I'm not hurt that I know of. One of its fangs caught me somewhere about the collar and tore my jacket right down to the waist."

"No, you can't be wounded," said the doctor, "or you wouldn't talk like that. Here, Chris, you say you fired?"

"Yes, father," said the boy, and he hurriedly related his experience.

"What an escape for you both!" cried the doctor. "The brute must have been desperately wounded by your pistol-shot, Chris, my boy. You hit him hard."

"Couldn't very well miss him at that distance, sir," said Griggs dryly. "The brute's lying somewhere about. Look out, every one, for he'll be pretty dangerous."

"He must have gone ever so far," cried Ned, "for I heard the trees breaking for long enough. But are you quite sure you're not hurt, father?"

"Not a bit, my boy; I only want a wash and another jacket. Ugh! This blood is horrible. But I say,

Wilton, you're a pretty sort of a fellow to keep guard while we slept!"

"Oh, I was on the look-out for Indians. You didn't say anything about bears. What was this one—a grizzly, Griggs?"

"Didn't see it, neighbour, but I shouldn't think it was. Black one or brown one, I should say. Cinnamon, p'r'aps."

"Why not a grizzly?"

"Because he wouldn't have taken a shot in him so quietly. He'd be rampaging about here ready to tear us all to pieces."

"Hadn't we better try and follow up the brute with the lanthorn?"

"I should say not," was the reply. "If he's only wounded he must be lying up savage-like, and as soon as he sees the light he'll show fight. If he's badly hurt he may have gone on till he drops, and be nearly dead by now."

"But we can't lie down and go to sleep again after this."

"Well, no, sir," said Griggs coolly; "it don't sound tempting."

"Then you would try and track the brute?"

"Yes, when the sun's up, sir."

"But what shall we do now?"

"Well," said the American, as coolly as could be, "seems to me that this is just a nice suitable time to sit round the lanthorn and tell bear stories."

"What!" cried the doctor.

"Tell bear stories, sir. Young Chris here might begin by telling his experience over again with all the flourishes, crosses, and dots that he left out. He didn't half tell it, I think."

"Oh, that's absurd," said Wilton. "By the way, though, I didn't hear a sound till Chris fired."

"Hadn't dropped asleep, had you?" said Griggs banteringly.

"No, certainly not," said Wilton, angrily.

"Here, every one look to his rifle," said the doctor,

"and we'll sit together and watch and listen. The brute may come back."

This was done in silence for some time, when their patience getting exhausted, remarks were made about the ponies and mules, and wonder was expressed about their not having stampeded.

"Say," said Griggs suddenly, "I forgot all about them. Where are they?"

"Feeding about somewhere, quietly," said the doctor.

"I don't know so much about that," cried Griggs. "P'raps one of you will come with me and the lanthorn, and we'll see. I can't hear any of them grass-chopping. Will you come with me, Chris, or have you been too much shook up?"

"Oh, I'll come," said Chris quietly. "I don't think I've been too much 'shook up.'"

In a few minutes the lanthorn was seen lighting up the rocks and trees in the direction of the best pasturage, where the cattle had been left; and those left in camp watched till it disappeared, waiting anxiously till the light was in sight again, and finally came up to where the glowing embers kept on brightening and dying out again as the soft breeze blew down the gully from time to time.

"Can't see or hear anything of the animals," said Griggs, at last, as he strode up with the light. "Ain't heard any more of Mr. B'ar, have you?"

"No," was the reply.

"They were scared off by the shooting, I expect, or else by getting a sniff of the b'ar's wound."

"Would they go far?" asked the doctor.

"Can't say, sir, but not so far that we can't follow them by their trail."

"It's a great nuisance, just when we had decided to make an early start in the morning. Now everything depends upon our finding the animals and bringing them back."

There was of course no more sleep that night, neither, much as it was expected, was there any return of

the visitor of the night during the long hours of the watch.

But the morning broke at last, and as soon as it was light enough the party began to follow the trail of the bear, starting from the spot where Bourne had his alarming adventure, the traces of which were plain enough, the earth and growth being torn up by the brute's claws. From there the spots of blood which had fallen from the bear's wound were plain enough at intervals, and they were followed for about a quarter of a mile, where the animal had plunged into the dense forest, where the trees and undergrowth presented a front that could not be penetrated by a human being, though comparatively easy for a quadruped.

Further pursuit was given up, and the party returned to follow up the trail of the ponies and mules.

This was found at once, the animals, obeying their gregarious instinct, having after being alarmed closed in together for mutual protection and made off down the gully to the open country and the plains.

Griggs took the lead from old experience of such accidents, and pointed out how the frightened beasts had galloped frantically for miles, then, pretty well exhausted, subsided to a trot, which had been kept up for several more before their progress became a walk, with halts here and there for grazing. In fact, it was several hours before the poor brutes were sighted right out on the salt plain, and when overtaken and headed off on the return journey, not even a single mule seemed to make the slightest objection, for they all closed up into a drove and walked steadily back, every animal with roughened coat stiffened by dust and ready to hang its head with the look of one which had done enough work for one day.

It was not until the afternoon that the dreary tramp back brought the party in sight of their last night's camp, and that was not reached until close upon sundown, a long halt having been necessary to water the weary beasts and let them graze.

"I don't think we're going to make much of a start to-day, Griggs," said Chris, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I know I'm not, squire," said the American. "It seems a shame to neglect human beings for the sake of horses, but it has to be done. Here, I meant to have a few birds for a roast this evening, and now it's only tea and fried bacon. But it might be worse, eh?"

"Ever so much," replied Chris. "But I am hungry."

"I say," said Ned, laughingly, "oughtn't some of us to go again and try to find the bear, while the others light the fire and boil the kettle?"

"No," said Chris. "We had enough bear last night."

"Yes," said Ned, "but that was live bear; I meant slices of him to frizzle in the pan. Griggs says bear's ham is good."

"So it is, squire, and if we had a haunch of the brute I'd set you an example to eat it."

"What does it taste like?" said Chris.

"Well, it's rather hard to say. A good fat bear's ham looks rather like a bit of a pig salted and dried; but it doesn't taste like it a bit."

"Like what, then?" cried Chris.

"Something like a mutton ham that has been trying to make believe that it had grown on a pig's hind-quarters. 'Tain't bad, but don't you two get letting your mouths water, because you'll get none to-night. It's tea and cake and a bit o' bacon. That's our tackle this time, and very glad I shall be to get even that."

In another hour they were quietly enjoying the simple meal, during which the doctor said—

"An early start in the morning, boys. You'll be able to sleep to-night, Chris, without dreaming about porcupines and skunks, which were all consequences of indigestion and the later supper."

"But the bear wasn't, father," said Chris quickly.

"Well, no," said the doctor dryly; "we'll leave out the bear."

"You ought to include it in your lesson on indigestion,

though," said Bourne, giving himself a rub. "I didn't eat too heartily last night, but I suffered horribly from bear lying heavily upon my chest."

"My watch to-night," said the doctor; and soon after the camp was once more in a state of repose, but Chris Lee had chosen a different position for his bed.





CHAPTER XXV

THINKING OF SUPPER

THE party was astir soon after daybreak, nothing having interfered with the night's repose, and the first thing seen to, was the state of the horses and baggage animals.

They too were all the better for the rest, but the result of the examination was a discussion between the doctor and Griggs over the injuries the animals had received. Two of the mules had been down, and showed injuries to their knees. One had evidently met with a bad fall over a piece of rock, and limped painfully, while two of the ponies wore the aspect of having been over-ridden.

"I think they ought to have another day's rest, Griggs," said the doctor.

"And I think they ought to have two," was the reply; "but what about staying here? The Indians may find and follow our trail."

"We must not think of waiting two days," replied the doctor, "but I think we might risk one, and we must send out a scout along the road we have come, to select a suitable spot on high ground and keep a look-out. If he sees danger on the way he must ride back and warn us. Meanwhile we'll have everything ready for an immediate start, keeping the animals close in, and the packs, so that we can load up at once."

Griggs nodded.

"What about the scout?" he said.

The doctor looked at him in silence.

"You mean you would like me to go?"

"Yes, but there is no reason why you should go alone. I could easily spare one of the boys."

"That's right—Chris," said the American, and in pretty good time that morning these two, with their wallets well supplied and their water-bottles filled, rode off along the back track to make a reconnoissance, with the understanding that they were to rejoin their friends that night.

It was a glorious ride through a lovely country, slowly and cautiously taken, till a spot was reached commanding the portion along which danger seemed sure to come if it was astir, and here, with their ponies hobbled to graze, Chris and the American watched hour after hour, enjoying the rest.

"But doesn't it seem queer," said Chris, as the day wore on, "just because we are bound to be so careful, and dare not fire a shot for fear of taking the enemy's attention, we have had chance after chance of getting birds? I should have liked to take three or four brace back with us."

"Yes," said Griggs shortly. "Been a nice change; but it wouldn't do."

The sun was getting low when Griggs finished a long search of the back country with the glass he carried, and ended by closing it and thrusting it into the case.

"No Indians to-day, or we should have seen them. I think we may start back now."

They were soon in the saddle, and, to Chris's delight, he found that his pony's stiffness had pretty well passed off, while, to the intense satisfaction of both, the slight lameness grew better and promised well for the next day.

They kept to a walk, pausing wherever a good view back could be obtained, till it began to grow dark, but they kept steadily on.

"Another hour ought to bring us to camp," said Griggs suddenly.

"And they'll be waiting supper for us," said Chris. "I hope they have done a little shooting. A turkey would be

splendid to-night. Don't you think so?" added the boy, after waiting in vain for an answer.

"I was thinking about something else," said the American slowly.

"What about—the gold city?"

"No, my lad, I was thinking about how awkward it would be if the Indians had found a better road than we did, and had got to the camp while we've been away."

"Griggs!" cried Chris in an agonized voice.—"Oh, nonsense! You said that to scare me."

"No; it's too serious a thing to cut jokes about. This is a big country, and we are only feeling our way, being strangers. Those Indian fellows were born in it, and must know it by heart."

"Here, let's ride on as fast as we can," said Chris huskily. "You think, then, that they may have been surprised?"

"I only felt that it might be possible."

"Then let's get on at full speed," cried Chris. "It's horrible to think that they may be wanting our help."

"We can't ride at full speed," said Griggs quietly, "only go at a walk; and I dare say it's all my fancy."

"But we might go faster than this," said Chris excitedly.

"No; the way's so bad that we should only throw our ponies down."

"But if——" began Chris.

"But if anything had happened there we should want our ponies to be fresh and ready for a gallop. It would be madness to hurry them over rough ground. There, I'm sorry I spoke, lad, for I honestly believe that I have alarmed you for nothing."

"I can't help thinking it is not for nothing," said Chris bitterly. "Why do you say that now? It's only to comfort me."

"Not quite all. I've been thinking. Suppose the camp has been attacked. It could not have been from this side."

"No, because we should have seen the Indians."

"Then it must have been from the other."

"Of course."

"What would the doctor do then?"

"Defend it to—the last," said Chris, with the final words seeming to stick before they would come.

"No, he wouldn't; he'd keep up a running fight."

"What, retreating?"

"I should say so; retiring on the detachment he had sent out, as a soldier would say. To put it differently, he'd begin to think as you did, for though you said nothing I could see your first thought was about your father. Wasn't it?"

"Of course," said Chris huskily.

"Yes, of course; and he'd say to himself, 'There's my boy over yonder with that long, thin Yankee chap. We must join them at once. Now, don't you see, if anything had happened we should have met them before now?'"

Chris could not speak, but reached over to hold out his hand, which was warmly grasped by Griggs, who then began to talk cheerily.

"Very stupid of me," he said. "I was feeling tired and mouldy. I've had precious little sleep, fidgeting about this wild-goose sort of expedition. I'm precious hungry too, and that makes a poor fellow feel low-spirited. My word, I mean to make my mark in that roast turkey to-night! *Sniff, sniff, sniff!* That isn't roasting I can smell, coming with the wind, is it?"

Chris laughed, and Griggs went on chatting.

"Keep a tight rein over these stony bits. I do like to take care of a horse," he said. "Poor beggars, they're the best of friends, but I do wish they wouldn't be such cowards. Getting up a stampede like that and chipping and straining themselves, all on account of a bear. They've no pluck."

"Then I suppose I've none either," said Chris, "for the bear frightened me."

"Ha, ha! Yes, and poor Mr. Bourne too. My word, didn't he holloa!"

"And no wonder," said Chris. "Wouldn't you have done the same?"

"I just should. I say, though, I hope they haven't shot any of those tough old gobblers, years old. They're as stringy as a fiddle. One just a full year old's the sort of fellow we want. Who'll be cook? Your comrade Ned, I expect. If he has let the bird burn I'll never forgive him."

"There'll be no turkey, Griggs," said Chris.

"What! Why?"

"Because father won't have any firing."

"Well, they might trap one, or knock one over with a stick sent flying like a boomerang."

"Here, I say, don't!" cried Chris. "I'm so hungry too that it makes my mouth water. Here, I know what we shall have for supper."

"Yes, what?" cried Griggs eagerly.

"One of those big tins of preserved meat warmed up with water in the kettle like a thick soup, and damper cakes, and tea as well."

"And not a bad supper either, lad, for hungry folks. Glad of it, for I've no faith in Ned Bourne's cooking. He can make capital tea and coffee, but when it comes to roasting a turkey, or cutting it up and frying it in a pan, I'd beat him hollow. How much farther have we to go?"

"About a mile," said Chris, and he had hardly spoken before from out of the darkness ahead came the Australian cry *Coo—ee!*

"There's Ned," said Chris eagerly. "Come to meet us. —*Coo—ee!* Is it all right?"

"Yes, all right," came back.

"'Tain't," said Griggs gruffly. "He's left the fire, and that turkey will burn."

"Soup," said Chris merrily.

"Well, soup, then," growled Griggs. "Why can't he stick to his work?"

"Any one with you?" cried Chris.

"No; I came on alone. Where's Griggs?"

"Here I am," replied the American to the voice out of

the darkness. "I say, how came you to leave that turkey?"

"Turkey! What turkey?"

"The one you were cooking for our supper."

"Oh, father's cook to-night; but there's no turkey."

"What, then?" said Griggs.

"Oh, a mess of tinned beef."

"There, I told you so," cried Chris.

"You never said a word about a mess," growled Griggs; "but I might have known. A nice mess it will be!"

Ned did not hear, for he was questioning and being questioned about the doings of the day, which had been as uneventful in camp as out of it.

Ten minutes later they were sitting near the fire enjoying the waiting supper, and in the reflection from the glowing embers Chris could see Griggs' face beaming with the smiles of satisfaction, as he made liberal use of a pewter spoon, and took semi-circular bites out of a hot bread-cake liberally ornamented with grey wood-ashes.

"How's the mess, Griggs?" said Chris merrily.

Griggs had only one word to say, and it fitted itself for usage as a long-drawn husky drawl.

The word was *Prime!*





CHAPTER XXVI

A VICTIM

“**A**ND you made it all out clear straight and took your bearings, doctor?” said Griggs the next morning, as the last pulls were given to the mule-ropes—the last diamond-hitches made fast.

“Yes, and it will be as easy as steering a boat. I could see the blue mountains from up yonder distinctly, but I’m afraid they’re more than a hundred miles away.”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir; distances are deceiving, and it all depends upon the weather. Why, I’ve seen a mountain look fifty miles nearer just before rain. Now then, is there anything else we ought to do?”

“I did everything yesterday that I thought right.”

“Water-barrels well full?”

“Yes, and every bottle and tin as well.”

“Good,” said Griggs; “then the sooner we’re off the better.”

Wilton sighed as they mounted, and gave a last glance at the beauties of the gully in which they had encamped, and again soon after as the little train wound on, with Skeeter’s bell chiming to the motion of his head, for at a turn before descending to the lower ground he had a glimpse of the far-spreading desert they were about to attack. It was beautiful in its way, but the grey monotony

soon palled upon him who looked, and the eyes eagerly turned again to the refreshing green.

In a couple of hours the last shrub had been left behind, and every one drew his breath hard and set his teeth, in the determination not to be baffled by the lesser troubles likely to hinder their way; but all the same, sighs once more rose for the beauty of the scenes and the refreshing breath of the mountains, which was already rapidly giving place to the hot reek of the sand and salt.

For a time the boys were startled into wonderment at the change which came over the scene as the sun rose higher, for as the hazy mist that overspread the plain began to rise, there before them lay spread out a wonderful expanse of water, one huge lake extending right to the horizon, dotted here and there with islands of beautiful form.

"Why, I didn't know——" began Chris.

"Nor I," cried Ned. "We shan't want for water."

They pressed on to join the doctor and Griggs, who were once more leading, and before either of the boys could open his lips to question, the former exclaimed—

"There, boys, you never saw the mirage so beautiful as that."

"Mirage! Then it isn't water?"

"Water? No; only a peculiar effect seen in the atmosphere over a heated plain. We shall see no water till we near the mountains on the other side. But there, talk as little as you can, and avoid this heated dust which rises from the mules' hoofs."

"It's wonderful!" cried Ned thoughtfully. "I felt sure that we were near a beautiful lake."

"Such as deceives travellers sometimes."

"Ah, it's bad," said Griggs, "when you're crossing a plain, choking with thirst, and the water-bottles are empty. A sight like that has driven men mad before now with disappointment."

The boys recalled these words over and over again during their journey, for from the very first they realized what a tramp through such a desert meant—the sun came down

with scorching power, and it was reflected up from the white sand and salt. At midday when they halted where there was no shadow but that cast by their four-footed companions, there was not a breath of air, and the poor brutes stood with hanging heads and drooping ears, panting and even sighing, while when the evening drew near the wind swept boisterously over the plain, but brought no refreshment, for not only was it hot, but it wafted up the fine, irritating dust and produced additional sensations of thirst.

The march was kept on long after sundown, when another halt was made for refreshment; but there seemed to be none, for the amount of water used was small in the extreme, and after about an hour's wait, during which the baggage animals had been relieved of their burdens, the doctor rose.

"Now then," he said sternly, "load up. We must keep on all through the night, and refresh again at daybreak."

"Refresh!" said Wilton dismally.

"Well, rest the mules," replied the doctor. "Then go on again for three or four hours and try and sleep through the hottest part of the day."

"What about keeping our course correctly through the night?" said Bourne.

"There are the stars," replied the doctor, pointing up to the clear sky. "I know exactly what to do. We must keep on now we have started, and bear it like men."

No one spoke, but "buckled to," as Griggs called it, and to relieve the horses the party tramped by their side for the greater part of the night, during the early hours of which Chris grew more and more sleepy; but as they approached "night's dull noon," he grew more wakeful and relieved the tedium by talking to first one and then the other cheerfully enough, and never at a loss for something to say.

"It might be worse, Ned," he said once during the night.

"Couldn't be," was the surly reply.

"Oh, couldn't it! It might come on to rain tremen-

dously. Well, what are you laughing at?" he continued, for Griggs burst out into a hoarse guffaw.

"You," replied the American. "Don't I wish it would rain! Why, it would cool everything. No, I don't know that, for the earth's so hot that all day to-morrow we should be in the midst of steam. It would refresh the horses and mules, though. Nice place this, isn't it?"

"Horrible! What's the use of having all this desert?"

"Don't know," said Griggs bluntly. "You tell me what's the use of having all that sea, and then perhaps I'll tell you."

They relapsed into silence then, and the monotonous tramp went on. There was no kicking or squealing among the mules. Skeeter tramped on with his bell going *clang—clang—clang*, in accompaniment to his steps, and the other mules followed as if walking like so many shadows in their sleep, while the ponies seemed to follow their masters like dogs, ready to accept every pat on the neck or word of encouragement, and after raising their muzzles to the offered hand and looking through the darkness appealingly, as if asking how long it would be before they came to water.

Morning at last. A halt, packs lowered to the ground, each animal's mouth washed out with about a pint of the precious fluid—water, and then their ration given in the form of very stiff gruel.

All this carefully done before the breakfast was attacked.

"I don't call it a breakfast," grumbled Ned.

"No, I wouldn't," said Chris. "Cheer up; we haven't so far to go now as we had yesterday morning."

"Well, I know that," snarled Ned, who seemed all on edge. Chris called it gritty, and said it was the sand—to himself.

"He gets it on his temper," thought the boy. "How queer it is that being hot and tired and thirsty makes any one so cross."

"Forward!" said the doctor at last, when the packs had been readjusted; and the dreary tramp began again, with the sun getting hotter and hotter every hour.

"Oh dear!" groaned Ned, as they tramped side by side, each with his hand resting upon his pony's neck and holding on by the mane. "That miserable tinful of water! Why, it was only half-a-pint, and it will be hours before we're allowed any more. Why not let us have a pint all at once?"

"Against the rules," said Chris. "You should have made believe, as I did."

"Believe what?"

"No, I didn't believe it," said Chris; "I only played at it. I drank my half-pint very slowly, and pretended it was a pint. You do the same the next time."

"Not going to be such a fool," said Ned gruffly. "It's all too real to play. Bother! Hang it! Yah! I wish there wasn't a scrap of gold in the world."

"But there is, all the same. Come, cheer up, lad."

"Cheer down, you mean. It's getting worse and worse, and I don't believe we shall ever get across this horrible plain. What is there to be cheerful about?"

"Well, here's one thing—we've got away from the Indians. There isn't a sign of them behind."

"Of course there isn't," grumbled Ned. "Indians are not such idiots as to come across a place like this."

"Griggs says they do sometimes."

"I don't believe it; they must always go round. Oh, I do wish we hadn't come."

Somehow or other, the more low-spirited and doleful Ned became, the more hopeful and cheery Chris seemed. Perhaps it was what he called make-believe, and put on by a great effort, but he was the brightest of the party and brought a smile to the lip of every one in turn with his light, trivial remarks, all of which, however, had a suggestion that, in spite of their terrible sufferings, he was looking at the best side of things.

"I say, father," he cried, as midday was approaching, "this is a better desert than the other one we crossed."

"I don't see much difference, my boy. Why do you think so?"

"It's so nice and smooth. You don't have to keep stumbling over stones."

"But that's a fault, boy," said his father. "Some of those great stones cast a little shade. Here we have none. Halt!" he cried loudly. "Four hours' rest and sleep."

The mules were unloaded, the ponies' saddles removed, and the tent-sheet was spread over the horizontal raised pole for shade, such as it was; and then no one thought of how, but lay down to sleep, lying motionless till the doctor summoned them again for the resumption of the march, when all began to compare notes.

"Sleep? No, I never had a wink," said Ned. "Who could sleep, with the sun seeming to burn a hole in that canvas?"

"I didn't go to sleep either," said Chris; "but one feels a bit rested with lying down."

"No, one don't," said Ned; and the weary tramp went on, with nothing visible in front of the overstrained eyes but the glare, and a thick misty look as if the atmosphere was full of hot, dusty sand.

The pace at which they went on appeared to be slower, but it was the party's want of perception which diminished and magnified at the same time, principally the latter, in making the journey appear longer than it really was, while that hot afternoon went on in a nightmare-like waking dream which made Ned complain at last that he was going off his head.

"I'm not," said Chris, laughing. "I feel as if I'm always going off my legs."

"What nonsense!" grumbled Ned.

"It isn't; I feel so. It's just as if my body goes on while my feet keep sinking in the sand and won't keep up."

"I wish you wouldn't talk," said Ned.

"Why? Do you want to think?"

"No, of course I don't. I only want to keep on in this half-asleep way; it makes it a little better then."

Another halt at sundown, a fairly good meal, and a refreshing sleep, before the doctor roused all once more

towards midnight for the tramp that was to last till about ten o'clock the next day. All was done this time in silence, save that Bourne tried to say hopefully—

“I should think we shall see the mountains quite clearly when day dawns.”

But no one answered, for nobody believed they would. A feeling of despondency was making itself too plainly felt, and when broad daylight did at last come all that could be seen was sand and soda everywhere, not so much as a shrub or scrap of grass, only scattered stones here and there, and the party shrank from looking in each other's wild and bloodshot eyes.

“Forward,” said the doctor, at last. “We'll keep on till about two hours before noon, and then have a good meal and rest till the sun's low. We must be getting well on to our journey's end.”

About this time the doctor edged up close to Griggs and entered into conversation with him in a low tone.

“What do you think of it?” he said.

“Don't think at all, sir,” was the reply.

“But we shall do it?”

“Must, sir.”

“That's right,” said the doctor, with a sigh of relief. “We must not think, but we must do it. We've got over the worst of it now, I feel sure.”

The doctor was wrong, for there was an unexpected trouble ahead.

Towards the promised time for the halt there was what all took for a more hopeful sign: the plain was growing more stony and undulatory, while sage-brush peeped out in clumps here and there, to be gladly welcomed by the animals, which lost not an opportunity of cropping the bitter shoots.

The sun was getting hotter and hotter, and the doctor drew out his watch, to close it again with a snap which sounded curiously loud in the painful silence.

“Only another hour,” he said, in a husky voice, “and then rest and breakfast.”

He had hardly uttered the words when one of the mules,

which had broken a little way from the line with outstretched muzzle, to nibble a few grey twigs, gave a leap which nearly dislodged its pack, and uttering a dismal squeal which was answered by two or three of its fellows, who turned their weary, straining eyes towards their companion, which now stood snorting and stamping angrily.

"What's the matter with the poor brute?" cried the doctor, who hurried towards the animal, closely followed by Griggs.

"Take care, sir——that," said the latter, in a whisper.

"That? What do you mean?"

"Bitten," said Griggs laconically, as he raised the double rifle that he had unslung, took a rapid aim, and fired the barrel loaded with small shot at what seemed to be an undulating line of grey sand.

The report sounded dull and dead, while as the smoke rose the undulating line of sand became a writhing tangle of something tying itself up into knots, untying itself, lashing the sand and dust up into a little cloud, and then as the dust rose the loathsome-looking length of a big snake became gradually clear to see, with the tail in the air announcing its owner's nature by keeping up a peculiar skirring sound something like the running down of a distant piece of clockwork.

"That's done for him," said Griggs, quietly reloading his piece. "Almost as big a one as they make 'em."

The little party closed round the dying reptile, and then followed the doctor to where he stepped up to the mule, which kept on stamping and making efforts to curve round and bite at its near hind-leg, but could not reach it on account of the pack it bore.

Griggs slung his double rifle and seized the end of the pack-rope, casting loose the load and letting it slide to the ground, while the doctor cautiously approached to examine the place at which the mule now tore fiercely with its teeth.

"Better not, sir," said Griggs warningly.

"But I want to try and help the poor brute," said the doctor.

"Yes, sir ; that's nice and humane," said Griggs ; "but mules are not horses nor dogs. The poor brute is mad with agony, and you'll be kicked or bitten, to a dead certainty."

"I feel as if I must risk it," said the doctor. "I might inject ammonia, and save its life."

He approached closer, holding out one hand and speaking soothingly to the poor beast ; but it turned upon him viciously and snapped at the extended hand like a dog, fortunately biting short, for the snap was sharper than the snatch back made by the doctor's hand.

"I told you so," said Griggs reproachfully. "Yes, we're going to be a mule short this morning."

For the effort seemed to be too much for the animal, which staggered, spread out its legs far apart, uttered a wild squealing bray, fell over on one side, and lay kicking and plunging as if going at full gallop as it lay.

"You're right, Griggs," said the doctor. "But what strength there must be in that horrible poison ! I should not have believed it would be so rapid and have such an effect upon an animal like that."

"It got a full dose of it close up where the skin's thinnest, I suppose ; and it was a big rattler, and no mistake."

Just then the mule made an effort to rise to its feet, but sank back to its former position, and its kicking and plunging grew weaker and weaker, till it lay panting, with outstretched neck and heaving flanks, evidently dying fast.

"I might try and do something now," said the doctor thoughtfully, "if the poor beast were held."

"Too late," said Griggs quietly. "I don't understand much about snake poison, but I should say that's running all through the poor thing now."

But Chris's father would not give up. Hide ropes were cast loose, while he hurried to the load which contained the little case of medicines and surgical appliances which was kept ready for emergencies, and then armed with bottle and syringe he superintended while nooses were

placed round the poor animal's neck and four fetlocks, each being tightened and the rope held by some one. Chris and Ned were ordered to the fore-legs, Griggs took the neck rope, and Wilton and Bourne the hind-legs.

At a word from the doctor the ropes were drawn taut and the poor beast stretched out helplessly upon its back, while the doctor seated himself astride, sought for the tiny punctures made by the rattlesnake's poison-fangs, and found them where the skin was thinnest and most devoid of hair, the successful discovery being due to a tiny drop of yellowish gummy matter which had oozed out.

A caustic was applied to this as soon as the tiny wound had been freely lanced and set bleeding, and then with the proper instrument a strong application of ammonia was forced into one of the mule's larger veins, and all with the slightest of resistance being offered. Lastly, encouraged by the animal's quiescence, a strong stimulative ball was thrust beyond the tongue and seen to pass down the throat.

"I can do no more," said the doctor, "but I should not have been satisfied if I had not tried. Be careful now how you loosen the ropes."

There was no difficulty, for the patient lay as still as if it had been utterly stupefied by the poison, and seemed to all appearance stretched out dead.

Chris looked at Griggs, who loosened his noose last, and the man shook his head.

"Could it breathe while that rope was round its neck?" said the boy.

"Breathe? Yes, of course, my lad. The lariat did not press upon the wind-pipe. There's no strangling in the poor brute's case. It's poison's the matter there. I say, it has wakened us all up."

It was curious to note the effect to which Griggs had drawn attention. Before the mule was stricken every one in the party had been giddy and ready to faint with heat and exhaustion, oppressed by a sense of despair and the dread that the end of the present journey would never

be seen; but as soon as a demand was made upon their energies, all the other troubles seemed to be forgotten on the instant, and they worked together heartily and with wonderful spirit, till they all stood watching the motionless mule.

Bourne was the first to draw attention to the state of affairs, as he began wiping away the perspiration that streamed down his face.

"I don't think you've done the poor brute much good, Lee," he said.

"I'm afraid not. I ought to have begun sooner."

"But you've done us a lot," continued Bourne. "Half-an-hour ago I didn't seem to have an ounce of energy left in me. I felt as if there was nothing to do but lie down and die."

"And I felt the same," chimed in Wilton.

"But as soon as the demand was made upon me I forgot everything in the excitement, and I feel now ready to go on for hours."

"Yes," said Wilton; "I feel as if Lee had been injecting new life through my veins. We've got all the benefit, while the poor mule is worse."

"Not much, sir," cried Griggs. "Look at that!"

There was no need for the order, every eye being directed at the injured animal, which after lying quiescent upon its side with outstretched neck and no signs of life save the slow, regular heaving of its flank, suddenly uttered a hoarse shout, gathered itself together, and rose quickly to its feet, to stand breathing heavily and coughing.

"Why, I do believe he's mastering the poison, doctor, and coming round."

There was no reply, every one being intent upon the mule's movements.

The hard breathing gradually ceased, and the poor brute shook itself, stamped with its injured hind-leg heavily, shook itself again, uttered an angry squeal, and curving itself round reached at the wound to bite the skin, acting, as Chris afterwards said, just as if it had been

bitten by a fly. The next moment it straightened itself again, stretched out its neck, and whinnied in a way which brought answers from some of its companions, and then dropped upon its knees and rolled over, struggling a little before lying still, its last breath coming in a weary sigh.





CHAPTER XXVII

'WON'T YOU SAY GOOD-BYE?'



VERY eye kept a sharp look-out as soon as the journey was recommenced, and a strong effort was made to place a few miles between the party and a spot evidently infested with the venomous reptiles of whose power such a terrible example had been seen. Plenty of energy too was displayed for quite a couple of hours. Then it died out at once; the boys and animals seemed as if they could go no farther, and a halt was called in about the barest spot they had seen. Several more suitable places had been passed—places where there was a scanty growth of sage-brush, others where the plain was rocky or encumbered with stones; but the doctor's word was "Forward," and the order was obeyed, for in the eyes of the adventurers every bush and every stone appeared to be the haunt of a dangerous enemy.

Where they halted at last the plain all round was thick with a dull silvery haze which intensified the heat of the sun, whose rays seemed to be passing through a burning glass, and it was only in obedience to desperate efforts that the tent-cloth was stretched for shelter and the animals watered and fed more sparingly than before. The provisions were spread out, but no one could eat. Every word and look was about the water and directed at the fast-emptying keg that carried it, other vessels having long since been exhausted.

"We must lie here till the sun goes down," said the doctor, almost solemnly, in spite of his effort to speak calmly; "it would be madness to persevere through this heat. Then we must make a brave effort to reach the mountains by morning."

"And if we don't?" said Wilton.

"Don't say if, sir," cried Griggs. "We must do it."

"If there are any to reach," said Bourne, to himself; but his words were heard.

"If there are any!" cried the doctor hoarsely. "I tell you there are. We saw them distinctly, Griggs and I."

"That's so, gentlemen," said the American.

"Then you must have lost your way, doctor."

"I have not if there is any truth in a compass. I laid down our course, and we have not deviated a bit. The sun and stars too have endorsed my calculations. Come, lie down and try to sleep. Afterwards we will serve out some more water, and walk all through the night. We must be nearly across now."

There was no answer made to this, every one lying down to try and forget the agonies of the intense heat and thirst in the sleep which would not come.

Chris and Ned were together, and lay so that they could look into each other's eyes despairingly; but neither spoke, closing their lids at last so as not to see, though with no expectation of obtaining the much-needed restful forgetfulness. But it came, and when Chris opened his eyes again it was to see by the dull red glow that evening was close at hand.

He raised himself upon his arm, and the faint sound he made was sufficient to rouse Ned, who also sat up, and looked at him wonderingly, as if he did not quite understand where he was, till Chris bent towards him and whispered—

"Come outside."

Ned followed him without glancing at the speaker, and they stood together in the misty heat glow, to note with wonder that some one was moving about from pack to pack and pausing from time to time to pat the mules.

The haze seemed to have thickened with the approaching night, so that the figure was indistinct and hard to see, but after making a few steps Chris said quickly—

“Why, it’s Griggs. What’s the matter with him? He’s staggering about as if looking for something.”

“The water-barrels,” whispered Ned hoarsely, and he caught Chris by the arm.

“What! He wouldn’t,” said the boy angrily. “Let’s see what he’s doing.”

The American evidently heard their approach, for he turned to gaze at them strangely; but he made no effort to join them, standing slowly rocking himself to and fro and saving himself from falling by clinging to the mule at whose side he stood.

“What’s the matter, Griggs?” said Chris hoarsely.

“Oh, it’s you!” was the reply. “I could see you both coming, but you looked swollen up into giants, and I couldn’t make it out.”

“But what are you doing here?”

“Doing here? Yes, I remember. We must find where the water is to-night, or it will be too late.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” cried Ned, in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Griggs strangely. “Must find the water to-night, or it will be too late. I’m going to ride on, but I can’t find the mustangs.”

“They’re over yonder,” said Ned quickly, pointing to where the ponies could be dimly seen.

“No; I’ve been over there, and they’re gone.”

“Going to ride on?” said Chris, as a thought struck him.

“Yes, before it’s too late.”

“But you are not in a fit state to ride on, Griggs.”

“No. Everything is going round and round. Head’s all strange and queer.”

“You couldn’t sit a horse now.”

“No,” said the man drowsily, as he laid his arms across the mule’s back, falling forward to slide to the ground, for the mule took two or three steps to get out of his way.

“Oh, Chris,” groaned Ned, “what shall we do?”

The boy addressed did not reply for some moments, and then he repeated the American's words as if to himself.

The next minute he seemed full of energy, and caught his companion by the shoulder.

"Ned," he said, "let's take the mule with the empty barrels, and ride on to get water."

"Where?" said Ned dismally.

"Amongst the mountains."

"Where are they?"

"Over there," said Chris, pointing.

"Where's over there?"

"To the left of where the sun's going down. That's where we've been making for all the time."

"Ride on?"

"Yes; it will be quickest."

"Come and ask father what he thinks."

"No," said Chris; "it would be losing time."

"We should never find it, and only die of thirst right away from the others."

"We should find it. We must find it, and bring some back."

"But the barrels—they're not empty yet."

"They are," said Chris solemnly. "I stood by this afternoon, and saw every drop drained out."

"Oh!" groaned Ned. "Then it's all over now."

"It isn't, I tell you. We must go."

"We couldn't do it; we're too weak. Come and ask your father what he says."

"It's of no use: I feel sure he's like poor Griggs here. There, the sun's going down, looking red as blood. Quick; the ponies can carry us, and we'll get the mule with the empty barrels between. He'll go then."

"Let's ask Wilton to go."

"Let's try and act like men," cried Chris passionately. "There, you mustn't oppose me. That's the way, straight there by where the sun is sinking. It must be right. You must, you shall come."

One weaker than Chris was then would have been

sufficient to overawe Ned in those terrible moments, and he yielded without another word.

The two water-barrels with their linking-chain and the wooden wool-stuffed pack-saddle lay ready, and the mule that had borne them suffered itself to be led to where it stood snuffling at the wooden vessels and passing its tongue about the bung-holes, till they were slung across its back, and then it stood quietly enough, as if instinctively grasping the object of this movement.

As for the ponies, they raised their heads from where they were striving to get a little nourishment from some dust-covered twigs, and whinnied their welcome to their masters when they were saddled and bridled.

All was soon ready, when Chris raised his head to mark exactly where the sun had disappeared—a hard task, for the heat haze was thicker than ever.

“Where’s that star?” he said impatiently.

“Which star?”

“That one that goes down of a night three hours after the sun. The one my father used to guide us by in the early part of the night, and said that it was a planet.”

“I don’t know. I never heard him say anything about it.”

“He did to me. There, there. High up; I can see it now; but it looks faint through this thick dusty air, and it’s higher up than I thought for. It will be clearer, and lower down by and by.”

“Are you going to steer by that?”

“Yes, of course. Ready?”

“No; we must go and tell our fathers what we are going to do.”

“No, we mustn’t,” said Chris stubbornly; “they’d only say we mustn’t go, and after what Griggs said I’m sure it’s our only chance. We must get water and bring it back, if they’re to be saved.”

“But are you sure of that? Mayn’t they be better in the morning, and ready to go on?”

“Not unless we get back with water. Now then, will you come?”

"I daren't, Chris," said Ned, with a groan; "it's too horrible."

"Then you're afraid?"

"How can I help it? See how dreadful it will be to strike right off into the desert all alone."

"Not so horrible as to stop here and see the others die like that poisoned mule. Come."

"I can't: it's cowardly to go and leave them."

"It isn't," cried Chris; "it's brave, and we shall find the water and bring it back. Come, we're wasting time. Come on."

"I dare not."

"Very well," said Chris. "When father wakes in the morning, tell him what I've done, and why."

"What shall I say?" cried Ned hoarsely.

"That I felt it was the only chance of saving all our lives; and if I don't come back it's because I couldn't find water, Ned."

"And then?"

"Good-bye."

"What do you mean by good-bye?"

"I don't know," said Chris sadly. "Only good-bye."

He held out his hand, but snatched it back and hurried beneath the spread-out tent-canvas, to drop upon his knees close to where the doctor lay plunged in a deep stupor more than sleep.

Chris did not rest there many minutes before he sprang up again and walked hurriedly to where Ned stood with the two ponies and the mule.

"Good-bye," said Chris then.

Ned made no reply, and giving his companion one long reproachful look, Chris placed his foot in the stirrup and sprang up into the saddle.

"Won't you say good-bye?" he cried.

"No," was the reply, almost in a whisper, and with the darkness coming on fast now Chris turned away his head and leaned to the farther side of his pony, to catch hold of the long hide-rope attached to the mule's snaffle-bit. Then pressing the mustang's sides with his heels, the brave

little beast stepped off boldly, the mule following close behind at the full length of the lariat, while the boy fixed the star with his eyes and made for it straight through the gathering gloom, which seemed to open out to receive him, and then closed in behind, so that after the first glance backward the boy made no other, for tent-cloth, packs, saddles, and the horses and mules had been absorbed by the haze.

If he had turned his head though, ever so little, he would have been able to see Ned standing by his pony; but he felt that he could not do that for fear of the weak feeling which caused a strange swelling in his throat increasing and causing a breakdown of the determination to which he had come.

"I can't do it," he groaned, as he rode on at a walk, and then repeating the word "Good-bye!" in a whisper, he bent forward a little, gave the hide lariat a jerk, and pressing his pony's sides, went off at an ambling trot, the mule following at once with the two barrels rolling against the wood of the pack-saddle, and with the chains making a peculiar hollow and jingling sound.

"If it were not so hot!" he muttered then, as he strove to think only of the object he had in view. "We ought to get over a long distance before daylight, for I feel as if I shall be able to do it, and the mountains may be near when the broad daylight comes."

He was getting along at a fair pace now, gazing straight at the planet and listening to the rattle of the two barrels, when his pony uttered a sharp neigh, which was followed by a squeal from the mule—two challenges uttered by those whose hearing was keener than their master's, and responded to by another neigh from behind.

In less than a minute, and before Chris had made up his mind which of the ponies was following, there was the beat of hoofs, and something shadowy closed in from the haze behind, to come close alongside.

"Who's that? You, Ned?"

"Yes," came in a husky voice.

"What do you want?"

"You know. I can't let you go all alone."

"What!" cried the boy, in a hoarse, cracked voice.
"You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do. You must be right."

It was the speaker who held out a dimly-seen hand now, one that was grasped and held while the ponies closed in so much together that the boys' legs touched as they cantered steadily on straight for a line drawn down in imagination from the planet now twinkling brightly—the guiding star which both boys mentally prayed might lead them to the object of their quest.

Then cantering steadily till the ponies dropped into a walk to avoid rough ground, the two lads rode on and on, with the barrels rolling behind, and the hours gently gliding by unheeded, till the glittering star sank lower and lower and dropped at last into the great bed of haze which seemed to extinguish it all at once, but not until Chris had marked down another to take its place as their goal.

Neither spoke, for their heads were too full of the object they had in view, with its hopes and many fears.

The ponies kept on straight for the starry guides, not deviating in the least from the point at which their heads had been directed by their riders, and the mule followed steadily behind, with the empty barrels keeping up their hollow, rumbling sound, and it was this that seemed to form a strange lulling accompaniment to the boys' thoughts, which in the course of their progress gradually darkened into a confused nightmare-like state. It was not sleep, but a stupor in which they kept on their horses instinctively, from no voluntary effort of their own. The state of exhaustion and weakness into which they had been lapsing during the perilous journey must have had much to do with their feelings, and robbed them of the power to feel more than a dull, numbing pain which came and went as their steeds ambled or walked unchecked or guided by rein, for even the lariat had glided from Chris's fingers and trailed along behind the mule upon the sand. Not that it mattered, for the mongrel beast kept steadily

on behind its companions, trotting or cantering or dropping into a walk as they gave it the cue, but never once stopping to rest or attempting to browse.

Always onward, straight onward, while the riders sank deeper and deeper into their strange stupor-like state, which, in one faint struggle back into partial consciousness, Chris had likened to the closing in of the sultry haze which seemed to him to press upon him as if it grew so thick that it held him fast what time he was being urged through it.

Then utter unconsciousness of everything, which lasted without change and as if the very calm, restful, painful end of all things had come.





CHAPTER XXVIII

A MULE'S SCENT

NED had much the same account to give as Chris of his sensations about the waking up on hearing a loud snorting and splashing, accompanied by the squealing of the mule and the rattling of the tubs and chain.

Sleep or stupor, whichever it was, the boys had kept their seats during the night, and at early dawn when Chris opened his eyes, half startled by the splashing, he saw what looked like a grey plain covered with dried-up salt, stretching right away to a thick bank of what appeared to be clouds.

Then as he sat staring wonderingly, he saw that the salt plain seemed to be in motion, little waves passing away from where he sat; and then, as the truth gradually dawned upon his misty brain, he slipped off his pony, to stand knee-deep in water and begin to scoop up the soft cool fluid and drink.

He had swallowed several mouthfuls before his brain grew clearer, and then his first matter-of-fact undream-like thought was of Ned, and he cried aloud—

“Water, water!”

The answer was a gurgling sound from somewhere to the right, and turning in that direction just as there was a tremendous splashing, he became aware of the fact, dimly seen in the grey dawn, that his companion was also

standing knee-deep and drinking; the ponies were calmly drawing in the refreshing fluid between their slightly-parted lips, and the mule was wallowing and trying to roll over, every now and then sending its legs in the air, for them to come down again and raise quite a spray, for the effort to turn right over was a failure, the two barrels secured to the animal's back acting like buoys and keeping afloat.

The next moment, regardless of his clothes, Chris dropped upon his knees, bent down till his lips were within touch of the water, and then he drank, so it seemed to him, as he had never drunk before.

Breathless after awhile he raised his head again.

"Ned! Oh, isn't it glorious!"

There was no reply, for his companion was now bending down and drinking with avidity.

But at last he too raised his head at the same time that the mule ceased splashing, stood up in the water, and gave itself a tremendous shake, before lowering its muzzle and drinking like the mustangs.

"Ned!" cried Chris. "Why don't you say something?"

"I can't," was the reply. And then: "I say, is it true, or only part of the long dream?"

"True, true!" cried Chris. "But look sharp. Let's fill the barrels and get back to camp."

"Hah!" ejaculated Ned in a long sigh. "Fill the barrels—get back. Yes, I'm beginning to be able to think now. My head felt all shut up and as if it wouldn't go. We have found water, then."

"Yes, and we've been drinking, and—— What are you doing?"

There was no answer, for Ned did not hear, from the simple fact that he had suddenly plunged his head right under water, to hold it there for nearly a minute, before raising it streaming.

"Oh, Chris," he cried, "do that; it's lovely!"

His comrade wanted no more inciting to follow the example set, keeping his head below the surface in despite

of the water thundering in his ears, till he was obliged to raise it and breathe.

"If we only had time for a swim," he cried, as he stood up panting once more.

"Yes, let's have one."

"No," said Chris; "the barrels—we must fill them and get back."

"Yes, of course," cried Ned. "I can't think properly yet. My head's all muddly. But how can we fill them? If we take them off can we lift them on the mule's back again?"

"Perhaps not," cried Chris. "But I know," he added, after a pause.

"Do you? Oh, my head's so muddly. Let's be quick and get back. I'm beginning to think now. Why, what wretches we are, drinking away here, and my father must be dying of thirst."

"Yes. Don't talk," cried Chris huskily. "Here, get to the other side of the mule and take hold of the bit."

Ned stared, but obeyed, and together they led the animal between them, wading farther into the lake, with the water gradually getting deeper, when as it grew breast-high Ned burst out with—

"Yes, the water seems to have melted something in my head, and I can think now. I say, are there any alligators here?"

"I don't know," replied Chris. "Perhaps.—Come on, you brute!" he roared, for the mule began to jib and refused to go any farther in when from its own natural buoyancy and that of the barrels its legs refused to touch the bottom.

Chris's fierce shout was accompanied by a heavy dig in the side from his knee, an act which Ned imitated with the result that the mule snorted, tossed up its head, and then lowered it, prior to kicking up its heels. But in performing the evolution of lowering its muzzle its mouth went down into the cool water, and the opposition ceased in the enjoyment of drawing in mouthfuls of the limpid element, while with all four legs separated to the utmost, the animal now refused to move.

"You brute!" roared Ned.

But the mule was quite aware of that fact. It knew it was one of the most despised of brutes, and had been told so till it ceased to have any effect, while now that it was drinking, whip or spur, kick or blow would have had no effect.

"Never mind," cried Chris. "I know—we can manage."

As he spoke he rapidly opened the tompion-like cover of one bung-hole, letting it rattle down by the side of the empty barrel and hang by its little brass chain, and then dragged at the barrel, trying vainly to bring the opening down to a level with the water.

"Oh, do something, Ned," shouted Chris. "We ought to be on the way back. Shove your barrel up as high as you can."

Ned thrust his shoulder under the side and forced the barrel up, and the wooden pack-saddle gave a little at the same time.

"That' do?" he cried.

"Yes, splendid!" For by pressing down with all his force Chris got the opening level at last with the water, which began to stream in till its weight rendered the task less difficult, and by degrees the barrel kept its own position, the air within going out in strange hollow sounds as it was dislodged.

"Now I'm more than half full, Ned," cried Chris eagerly. "I'll hoist up my side while you draw your barrel down."

This task proved more difficult, but after a few tries a little water rushed into the empty receptacle. Then a little more and a little more, till Chris thrust upward with all his might, and the clear fluid ran in with a rush, till the mule raised its head, shook the drops from its muzzle, and whinnied.

Then, feeling far less buoyant from what it had drunk and the way in which the light barrels began to be turned into weights which kept it steady, there was no more resistance to being led in deeper, so that with very little effort the casks were lowered in turn till the water ceased

to flow in, and the tompions were replaced and safely secured.

The water was now, at every movement made, passing in little waves right over the mule's spine, and there it stood showing its teeth as if preparing to bite, but made no vicious effort, only stood blinking its eyes and turning its ears in all directions as if in the height of enjoyment.

As soon as the second barrel was secured, "full to the bung," the mule's head was turned.

"Go on!" shouted Chris, and it slowly walked out of the shallowing water, till it stood dripping on the sandy marge.

"Now," cried Chris, "I'm going to lead my mustang in as far as I can wade, so as to get regularly soaked, and it will freshen the beasts too."

"Yes, capital. Shall we take off the saddles?"

"No, we won't stop."

The ponies were led in till only their necks were out of the water, and then turned towards the shore; but they stopped twice to drink, and were approaching the spot where the mule stood, when Chris uttered a cry and caught at his saddle to save himself, his pony at the same moment making a plunge and snorting violently.

"What's the matter?" cried Ned anxiously.

"Some big fish struck at me suddenly. No, I know, it must have been a big alligator."

Ned's jaw dropped and his eyes opened very wide as he began to splash through the water as hard as he could go, the pony following willingly enough, but only to snort and plunge as a swell of water rose before them where the water was very shallow, and a dark, bark-like, glistening back was seen for a moment, followed by a tapering tail, as a reptile glided by.

"I wonder whether the brutes would bite," said Ned.

"I shouldn't like to trust them," was the reply. "But oh, what a change since last night," continued the boy, half wild with delight, as the sun began to show a little over the edge of the horizon, flooding the world with golden

light and turning the pale, silvery lake as it were into glowing fire.

The boys only glanced for a moment or two at the glorious scene before them of lake and undulating country backed by mountains. Then, after tying the trailing lariat about the mule's neck, they mounted their ponies, all dripping as they were, ready for the march to camp, but only to suffer a chill of misery as the same thought struck both—

Which was the way back ?

“Why, we shall never find them !”

“Coming here as we did, fast asleep as we must have been,” groaned Ned.

“The mule must have smelt the water far off,” said Chris, “and found the way here.”

“Yes, but he won't find the way back to camp. What shall we do ? What shall we do ?”

There was a piteous, despairing ring in Ned's voice as he sat gazing woefully in Chris's eyes.

“We might go right away,” said the latter thoughtfully, and then in a tone full of exultation, “We're a pretty pair,” he cried ; “look how plain the hoof-marks are in the sand. Why, we've only got to pick up the trail and follow it back. There, you go that way and I'll go this. It can't be far away.”

“No, of course not,” cried Ned, urging his pony forward in the direction indicated, while Chris started in the other, keeping close to the water's edge, where the sand was firm.

But the mule was not going to be left alone, and followed Chris's mount. Not for far. Within a hundred yards there were the hoof-prints of the animals, going straight into the shallow lake on one side and on the other leading straight away over the sandy plain, which here came right up to the water's edge.

“*Coo—ee !*” shouted Chris, and Ned came cantering back.

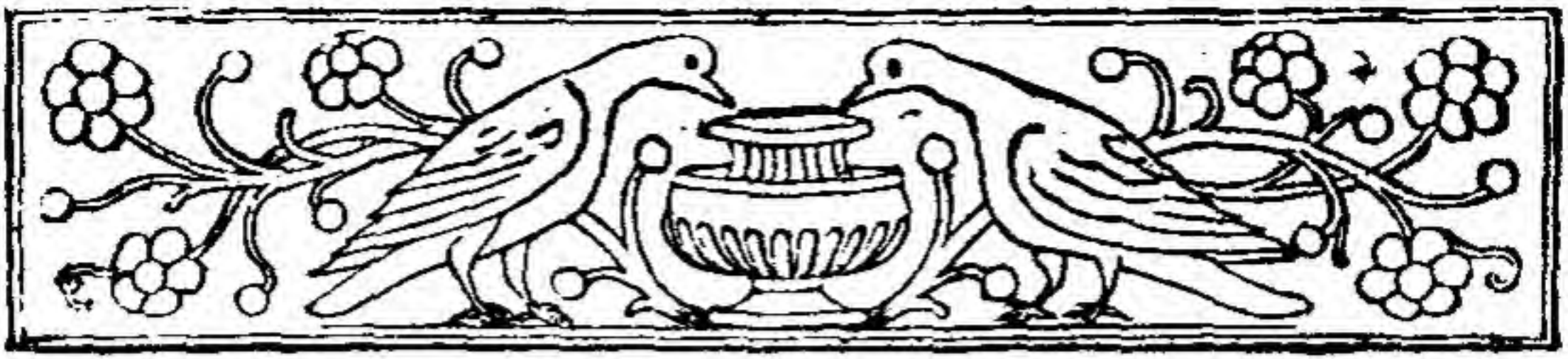
“Found the trail ?” he cried.

“Yes, here it is, with the mule leading. That's where he walked right into the lake. And we've been abusing

mules and calling them names ever since I can remember. Ned, I'll never be a brute to a mule again. Will you lead ? ”

“No. You found the trail. Go on, and I'll come last. As fast as you can.”





CHAPTER XXIX

DESPERATE STRAITS

CH^RIS uttered a wild whoop of delight.
“Water! Water! Water!” he shouted.
“Here we come!”

The announcement was intended for those he had left at the camp, but the words seemed to be lost in the immensity of space. But he did not heed this, only pressed on, to halt at the end of a hundred yards for the others to come up. His pony had lowered its head as if recognizing the track and started off at a canter; but Chris realized directly that the progress did not depend upon him but the mule, which at starting refused to go in advance of Ned, and stubbornly stood still, and no urging would make it move.

“Come on first, Ned,” shouted Chris, as the efforts of his companion proved to be in vain.

“Oh, he is a brute!” cried Ned, but he did as he was ordered, following his leader, and the mule, heavily laden as it was, lowered its head and began to lounge along last at the regular mule pace.

“Oh, but this won’t do,” cried Chris, as they came up. “I never thought of it when we were filling the barrels. It’ll take no end of time to get back like this.”

He led on again in silence, seeing the trail marked plainly enough, and wonderfully straight, the animals having pretty well always stepped in their leader’s tracks.

But at the end of a few minutes' advance at a walk he turned his head to shout back—

"Oh, Ned, Ned, what shall we do? Everything, you see, depends on this mule, and he'll only keep to his regular pace. His load's too heavy. We must run half of it away."

"What! Waste that water? No."

"But it seems so heavy."

"He wouldn't go a bit faster if you poured away nearly all."

"I'm afraid not," groaned Chris. "What can we do? I say, I wonder how far it is to camp. Can you guess, Ned?"

The boy shook his head.

"It must be," continued Chris, as he rode on, wrenching right round in his saddle, and trusting to his mustang to follow the back trail, "just as far as the mule would walk from the time we started till daybreak this morning. Hours and hours and hours, all going so slowly, for we should have been woke up if they had broken into a fast trot. I'm afraid we must spill out some of the water."

"But I tell you that this slow wretch wouldn't go a bit faster. He's walking now just at the same rate as when the barrels were empty."

Chris felt that these were the words of truth, and remained silent. He would have gone behind the animal and bullied or urged it forward with blows, in spite of his late words, but he felt confident that the result would only be a stubborn fit, kicking or perhaps lying down.

A short time before the boy had felt in the highest glee. Success had attended their effort, and there seemed to be nothing else to do but hurry back to the fainting sufferers with the life-giving fluid and receive their thanks and praise, while now, in addition to the bitter despair and misery, there was a fresh sensation which he connected then with a feeling of sinking that made him gaze piteously at his companion, but only to be struck with his sunken eyes and agonized aspect.

"Don't look like that, Ned," he said. "Why, you're worse than I am."

"I can't help it. I feel quite ill. We shall never get back to them in time. Father looked as if he wouldn't be able to get up again."

"So did my father. I never saw him look so dreadful before. He must be in an awful state, or else he'd have been able to take something from the medicine-chest to help him hold out longer. But there, it's of no use to give way like this. We must get back to camp with this water. Do you hear? We must!"

"Yes," said Ned mournfully. "We must.—Chris."

"Yes?"

"If I fall off my nag and can't get up again——"

"Oh, don't talk like that. It's idiotic."

"I can't help it. If I fall over and lie still on the sand, I want you to promise me something."

"Then I shan't," cried Chris shortly. "Get out! You're going to pretend that you'll lie down and die, and you're going to make your will."

"No; it wasn't exactly that; but if you get back to them and are saved, you may have my four-bladed knife with the stone-pick and lancet in it."

"Oh, hang your old knife!" cried Chris ungraciously. "I don't want it. Mine's ever so much better, and doesn't hurt your hand when you're cutting anything. Now, no nonsense! Fancying you're going to fall off your pony and not being able to get up again! Why, if you go on fancying such things as that in the hot sunshine, you're pretty well sure to turn giddy and go down. Look here."

"Yes?" sighed Ned.

"I feel just as bad as you do, but I don't begin a lot of nonsense about leaving you my knife.—Such stuff!"

"It isn't stuff," sighed Ned. "I'm horribly ill now. So faint and strange."

"Have some water. I'll get some out."

"No, no, no; I've had enough. I don't feel a bit parched and thirsty now, for the water seems to have gone right into me from my wet clothes."

"The same here," said Chris, after a glance over his shoulder to see if his pony was keeping to the return trail, and being convinced that he was. "I could talk like you, for I never felt so ill before. I say, how one's things are drying in the sunshine! I've quite done dripping."

"Yes; but, Chris, I haven't told you all I was going to say."

"And you needn't. You were going to say that I might have your German silver pocket-comb too."

"I wasn't," said Ned reproachfully. "But you may, and everything else I've got, for I shall never want them again."

"Yes, you will, stupid. Oh, I say, don't be such a Molly."

Ned shook his head.

"Won't you listen to me?" he said piteously.

"Why, of course I will, old chap. I'm only talking like this because I want you to be plucky. Ned, you're not going to lie down and die. You can't—you shan't. I've felt like this for the last half-hour, but I won't let myself believe that it's all through the despair and misery we feel."

"But it is, Chris. I'm glad I came with you, though," said the poor fellow sadly.

"So am I, and it was very jolly and chummy of you. Just like you, Ned. We've often had rows, but we always made it up again, and I never liked you any the less. Never half so much as I did when you came trotting after me to look for this water."

"I like to hear you say that," said Ned, smiling faintly. "If you get safe back I want you to think still in this way after I've gone."

"After you've gone!" cried Chris passionately. "Oh, if we'd only plenty of time and weren't so faint, I should like to have the worst row with you that we ever tried to fight out. You're not going to lie down and die. It would be absurd after we've got the water, and——"

Ned started and bent forward, holding on to the

pommel of his saddle with both hands to steady himself, for as he rode almost backwards Chris suddenly clutched at nothing and nearly fell from his seat.

"There, there!" panted Ned. "Oh, don't fall, Chris! One of us is enough. You mustn't fall and lie there, because I want you to do something for me."

"Yes," said Chris softly, and with a wild-eyed stare at his companion.

"I want you to tell father that I held out to the last, and tried hard to do my duty as he told me to always."

"Yes—yes," sighed Chris hoarsely. "I'll—I'll tell him, if I get back to camp. But oh, Ned, it is so hard now, when we've got the water. All the strength has gone from me. I say, tell me, if we both fall out of our saddles and lie there, do you think that the ponies will go on to the camp?"

"No; I'm sure they won't. They'll stop beside us, looking down in our faces with their big, patient eyes. They won't stir for ever so long."

"Oh!" groaned Chris faintly. "And we shall have got the water for nothing."

"No," said Ned. "The ponies will stop, but the mule won't; he'll keep right on along the back trail, and they'll get the water after all."

"Ah!" sighed Chris, with a bright light coming into his eyes. "Then it won't have been for nothing."

"What are you doing?" said Ned, more strongly, as he saw his comrade begin to unfasten the knotted silk kerchief about his neck.

"Going to tie this to the chain. Father will know it's mine, and that it means good-bye, and——"

The effort was too much. The giddiness from which he was suffering mastered him, and he fell over sideways on to the fast-heating sand, but with his left foot fast in the stirrup-iron, while the pony kept on a few feet before stopping short and turning to gaze down in his rider's face.

"Chris! Chris!" cried Ned, checking his pony as he closed up, while the mule went tramping on with its heavy load as if nothing whatever was the matter,

To the last speaker's wonder and horror, as the excitement of his comrade's mishap drove his own sufferings into the background, Chris raised himself a little and extricated his foot from the stirrup, before hauling himself up by the leather, to stand steadying himself by the saddle, laughing the while what sounded to Ned like a wild, hysterical laugh that was to be his last.

"Chris!" he cried.

"It's all right," gasped the boy, struggling to grow calm. "That tumble has knocked the faintness out of me. I know now—what's—what's the matter with us both."

"Chris!" rang out again.

"I know, I tell you—I felt a little while ago—oh, so ill, as if something was coming on and we were both going to die. But I know now. Can't you see, Ned?"

There was no answer.

"Then I'll tell you. What did you have to eat yesterday?"

"Eat? I couldn't eat, only drink that little drop of water."

"And I couldn't, and didn't have above half a meal the night before. Then we've been through so much ever since, and drunk all that water, and the sun's been beating down on us."

"What!" cried Ned, staring. "You mean it's because we're so hungry?"

"Why, of course it is. Now, tumble off your pony and lie down and die if you dare!"

"Chris!"

"That's it, I tell you, and you know it is. Oh dear, I feel so light-headed, and so empty and faint, and nothing else the matter with me at all, only that I'm so miserable because we can't get on faster."

Ned sat staring and thinking hard, but he said no word in contradiction of his companion's theory.

And there they stayed for quite ten minutes, Ned seated in his saddle, Chris standing resting against his, and with his pony pressing against him as if to keep him upright.

"Look at old Skeeter's brother," said Chris, at last. "He must be his brother, because he's so like him."

Ned looked in the same direction as his companion, to see that the mule had gone plodding on along the trail, flapping one ear to keep off the flies, and looking as if nothing would prevent it from going straight back to the camp.

"I say, you feel better now, don't you?" said Chris suddenly.

"I feel very ill and weak and giddy."

"That's how I feel," said Chris, "and I'm afraid to try and get up into the saddle again. I know I shall go down bang."

"No, no, don't," cried Ned excitedly. "Here, I'll get on the other side, and take hold of your hand."

"Shan't I pull you down too?"

"No," said Ned, speaking more strongly; "I won't let you."

"Catch hold, then," cried Chris, as his comrade urged his nag alongside that of Chris, and then as they joined hands, the latter raised his left foot to the stirrup, sprang up, and dropped into the saddle with a sigh of relief.

"Well done us!" he panted. "Who'd ever have thought that being half starved would make two fellows feel like that?"

"It was awful, wasn't it?"

"Not so horrible as thinking about them all dying for want of water. Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, can't we get one barrel on your or my pony and ride on fast?"

"No," said Ned decisively. "We couldn't hold it on, and we couldn't go fast."

"And we couldn't fasten the other on the mule's back. Is there nothing else we could do?"

"I can't see anything but going right on. Let's catch up to the mule now and keep on talking so as to forget about being so faint. I say, how fast one's clothes dry!"

"Yes," said Chris; "and how cool one feels in spite of the sun coming down as if it would roast us. Do you know why it is?"

"No," replied Ned.

"I'll tell you, then. Father told me once. He said it was one of the laws of physics."

"I say, don't talk about physic now."

"Who was talking about physic, stupid? I said physics—natural science. Father said that in evaporation a feeling of coolness always comes on. That's what we feel now as the water in our clothes evaporates. He showed me how to cool water by filling a bottle and wrapping it in flannel, then keeping it wet and standing it in the sun."

"Yes, I knew that made it cooler, but I didn't know it had anything to do with evaporation. Then the water in the barrels must be nice and cool."

"Nay, not it," said Chris sharply. "That's getting warm, because the outside of the barrels is not kept wet.—Well, old Skeeter's brother, how are you getting on?" he cried, as they rode up one on either side of the mule, the only answer being the cocking of one ear in the speaker's direction, the other at Ned.

"Let's give up worrying about it, Chris," said Ned at last. "We can do nothing else but keep on as we are, only hoping and praying that they're all lying down trying to sleep till we come. It's impossible to get on any faster."

"Quite," said Chris despairingly. "I will hope and feel sure that all will turn out as it should. It must. It shall. I say, how long have we been coming since we started?"

"I don't know, and I can't think," was the reply.

"I say, I can't see the lake now," cried Chris. "It's all hidden by the thick hot haze that has closed in."

"Can you see the beautiful country and the mountains there still?"

"No; nothing but the thick, hot, transparent mist and the sand and sage-brush everywhere, behind, just as it is now in front. I say, how well old muley keeps to the trail! I wish it wasn't so hazy; we should see the tent perhaps then."

Ned turned off the conversation at a tangent, for the sight of a clump of stones gave him a subject full of interest.

"Stones and rocky bits, with little heathery-like bushes. I say, Chris, keep a good look-out. Isn't this the sort of country for rattlesnakes?"

"Ugh!" ejaculated Chris. "I say, how horrible if the mule were to step on one of the nasty reptiles now."

"We should have to fit the barrels on one of the ponies then, and take turns at walking. But let's try and guide them more away from the heath."

They tried, but the mule resisted their efforts at once and showed a stern determination to keep to the trail, while the ponies backed it up on either side.

Then the conversation dropped, was resumed again twice, but in vain at last, for the heat and exertion were telling upon the poor lads now to a terrible extent. Their eyes grew wild and bloodshot, the faintness came on with increased force and refused to be exorcised, with each brain swimming at first a little, then more and more, till a heavy stupefying state of torpor supervened, and it was no longer the riders that directed their four-footed friends, but the latter leading them on and on hour after hour.

Though the boys could not realize the fact, the sun had crossed the meridian and was slowly beginning to descend, when there was a sudden arousing from the torpor-like state, brought about by the mule coming to a standstill with its legs spread out widely, hanging its head, while its drooping ears and starting eyes told plainly enough that it was suffering acutely from heat and exhaustion, its eyes seeming to say mutely—


"The burden is too heavy, masters; if I stir another foot I must drop."

"Can we do something—open one of the barrels and soak a handkerchief to hold it to the poor thing's mouth?" said Chris loudly—he meant it to be, but it was only a hoarse, harsh sound which came from his lips, while when he descended from his saddle to step towards the barrel nearest to him, it suddenly seemed to fade away into the haze through which they had been passing, and in his effort to catch it poor Chris fell headlong to the ground and lay staring blankly upwards at Ned.



CHAPTER XXX

WAKING UP

“ H, Chris!” groaned Ned, as he dismounted feebly, to fall on one knee by his companion’s side.

Chris’s eyes followed every movement, and he seemed to hear what was said, for he smiled faintly.

“That’s you, isn’t it, Ned?” he said slowly. “Can’t see. Black spots floating about in front, and everything going round and round.”

Ned’s answer was another groan, for the trouble was on the increase.

The poor mule had done its best and kept on till it could do no more. Just then it made an effort to go on again, looking wistfully at Ned, in whose acts it evidently read an order for it to advance.

Drawing its legs together into a more natural attitude, it took a step or two, stumbled, and then dropped upon its knees, made another effort to rise, but failed, and doubled its hind-legs under it, to crouch so that the two barrels rested on the sand; and then the poor beast uttered a long hoarse sigh as if of relief, while for a time it made no further effort to stir.

Ned glanced at the ponies, the thought occurring to him that he ought to secure their reins; but they did not display the slightest desire to leave their companion, only

stretching out their necks towards the mule and breathing hard before pressing forward slightly, to begin snuffing at one of the barrels.

This act set Ned's wits working, and he recalled what Chris was about to do. He was so faint and giddy that it required a painful effort even to stir, but he caught the kerchief from his companion's hand and began to unfasten the well-secured stopper of the nearest barrel, which stood steady enough now in the sand.

This done, he thrust in about half of the kerchief, let it soak full of water, raised it carefully so that every superabundant drop should fall back into the barrel, and then pressing open Chris's lips squeezed a few drops between them, more and more as they were swallowed with avidity, and passed his wet hands over the prostrate lad's temples.

This he did again and again, suffering an acute longing to treat himself in the same way, but resisting the temptation, till Chris closed his eyes with a weary sigh, his lips tightening together, and he lay motionless.

Ned soaked the handkerchief again, and pressed its contents in his own mouth, swallowing the moisture with avidity, noting the while that the two ponies were licking the farther barrel and breathing hard, as if they could feel the cool fresh odour of the water playing in their nostrils, while at the same time the mule, pinned down by the weight of the two barrels, strained its neck round and whinnied, as it looked piteously in his face.

The look had its effect, for the end of the kerchief was once more thrust into the barrel, allowed to soak, and then drawn out.

"I don't know how we're going to manage," thought the boy, as he held the dripping corner of the kerchief towards the mule's muzzle; but the poor brute did, and acted without hesitation, making a snap as sharply delivered as that of a dog, and catching the end between its strong teeth. Then it gave its head a toss, and treating the water-bearing piece of fabric as if it were a wisp of wet grass, drew it, dripping and cool, right into its mouth, the sharp tug or two given overcoming Ned's resistance.

Before the boy could recover from his surprise there was a quick juicy sound of champing in accord with the movement of the mule's jaws, a gulp, and the kerchief had gone.

"You stupid brute!" cried Ned indignantly. "What am I to do now?"

Common-sense suggested what should be his next proceeding, and that was to take off his own handkerchief and his felt hat, which he turned inside out. Then laying it beyond the mule's reach, he soaked the fresh kerchief till it would hold no more, squeezed it so that the contents fell into the reversed crown of his hat, and repeated the act till about half of half-a-pint of dirty water lay ready. This he held out to the mule, which plunged in its lips and rapidly sucked out every drop.

Repeating the process, Ned managed to give each of the ponies enough to wash out its mouth.

"If I only had a straw or a reed!" thought the boy; but there was hardly a twig of the sage-brush to be seen, and he shook his head in despair.

But there was something else to do. The mule was fidgeting, and any restive action on the beast's part might mean waste of water; so he hurriedly closed the tompson, leaving its brass chain so that there was no risk of loss; and this was hardly done before, refreshed by its portion, the mule made a desperate effort to rise, but only got its fore-legs well planted, and then sank back. It made two more trials, but with less and less success, and then, apparently fully aware of the fact that the weight carried was too much for it, resignation ensued, and the poor beast lay partly over on its side between the barrels, and made no further effort beyond seeking for a restful position in which to lay its heavy head. This was fully stretched out in the sand, where the last thing Ned seemed to see was the twitching of the poor brute's long ears to rid itself of the flies which attacked it as if under the idea that they had found something dead.

The sun's intense heat soon made the boy aware of the fact that his head was bare, and restoring his hat to its proper shape he replaced it, finding it cool enough to

enable him to think a little more clearly of his position and ask himself whether he could do anything more. He asked Chris the same question that he had put to himself, but there was no reply, for it was evident that the poor fellow had sunk into a complete state of stupor, and he was soon aware that he was fast following his friend's example. For the soft black spots began to float before his eyes, growing larger and larger, till they seemed to blot out the objects that had begun to sail slowly round and round.

There was a little reaction after this, and he saw the mule's eyes closed and the two mustangs sniffing again at the farther barrel, and heard them sigh as if in weary disappointment at not being able to get at the contents. But Ned felt no trouble, for everything seemed to be restful now that he was convinced that he could do no more after doing his best.

There was the glowing haze all around, and the terrible silence of the dusty plain, with the nearest objects standing out with wonderful clearness, till they began at last to sail slowly round and round him, while the black spots formed in front of his eyes—tiny distinct specks at first, which gradually swelled and swelled till they grew soft and blurred; blacker and blacker too, as they blotted out the moving objects, and finally the glowing, hot, silvery haze; and then all was black darkness and silence profound.

At last.

Ned did not know what that meant. He did not hear any words spoken nor how it was. It was his coming back into a state of consciousness, and all he felt was that it somehow was at last. Time had nothing to do with it, and the first consistent thought was that it rained hard; the next that something was stinging his nostrils as if hundreds of tiny points were being inserted into the soft, delicate skin.

Soon after he seemed to be listening to people talking a long way off. They were making remarks about some one else, but he had no idea what, till it was as if something

cracked in each ear and he started with his eyes wide open, to see that the sky above was all of a deep red glow, and on looking round him there were faces and mules, and packs lying just as if they had been taken off the mules' backs.

"He's coming round now," said a familiar voice, and then he started again, to find that everything was clear, and that he was looking in the doctor's face.

"Is he?" said Ned sharply, in a voice that he did not know for his own. "Has he been very bad?"

"Worse than any of us, Ned, my boy," said another familiar voice.

"Is that you, father?" cried Ned.

"What's left of me, my boy. I began to think we should never shake hands again. You two fellows saved our lives."

Ned was silent, and lay with his hand pressed to his forehead, waiting till he could quite grasp that which seemed to be dancing strangely in his brain.

"No, father," he said at length; "I recollect now. We did try, but we couldn't. We broke down."

"Yes," said the doctor; "but just where we could find you when we were struggling on and nearly at the last gasp."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Lee.—Who's that—Griggs?"

"Yes, it's me," said the American, "but I'm feeling pretty thin, my lad, I can tell you. May I shake hands?"

"Why, of course!" cried Ned.

"Come away from him now," said the doctor in a whisper. "I'm rather troubled about his head."

"Oh, it don't ache now," said Ned sharply, "and things are not going round now. But you said Chris was better?"

"Yes. He's sleeping under the tent. I kept you here because there is more air."

"Where are we?" asked Ned anxiously.

"Just in the same spot as when we found you, with the mule broken down under the heavy load of water."

"Of course. I remember it all now," cried Ned excitedly. "I broke down first, and after I got better it was poor old Chris. But he's all right now?"

"He will be soon," said the doctor.

"Can you tell us how far it is to the water, Ned?" said Wilton, making himself heard for the first time.

"No," said Ned thoughtfully, "but I'm afraid it's a long way. Why?"

"Because we've finished one of the barrels and half of the other, my boy," said Bourne. "We must be getting on again, then, doctor?"

"Yes; as soon as they can sit their horses."

"Can't be very far, sir," said Griggs, "because of the time they were away. Say, Ned, my lad, can you tell us when you started back with the water?"

"Yes," said the boy; "directly after sunrise."

"And when did the mule cave in?"

"I don't quite know, because my head felt so thick; but it was when the sun was hottest. I think I could show you the way, though."

"Oh, we can find the way, squire; you have written that down clearly enough in the sand. Tell us one thing more, though," said Griggs. "What did you find—a rock spring or a pool?"

"A great lake that stretched out as far as we could see."

There was a faint cheer at this, and the boy smiled.

"But there are big 'gators in it."

"I don't care if there are crocodiles in it half-a-mile long," cried Griggs. "We're going to have our share. Then it's beyond the salt desert?"

"Oh yes. Beautiful green country, with mountains and trees."

"Within half-a-day's journey," said the doctor. "Then I think we may give the poor beasts what water there is left."

"Yes, sir," said Griggs. "I'll give 'em my share; but I never grudged parting with it so much before in my life. Shall I begin?"

"Yes, poor things; but they will not have much a-piece even now."

Griggs laughed.

"No, sir," he said. "Skeeter would get outside the whole half-barrel if you gave him a chance, and then roll round the whites of his eyes and ask for more."

By the time the water had been given to the beasts, all but a small portion reserved for the two boys, it was dark, with the stars just dimly seen through the haze. All was ready, and the mules and horses stepped out briskly, the last drink having worked wonders; but probably the wonderful instinct of the mules taught them that they were nearing the end of their horribly toilsome journey. Perhaps it is not too much to say that by some subtle power of communication they had learned the fact from those which had made the journey before. Certainly our dumb friends do communicate good and bad information to one another.

Neither Chris nor Ned seemed much the worse since they had had a light meal, but sat their ponies well enough once more, while there was no need for their guidance, for the mule which had borne the water-barrels, unladen now, having been placed with the bell-bearer in front, started off freely enough, and needed no guidance to keep it to the track.

Naturally enough the two boys rode that night knee to knee with the doctor and Bourne, each giving and receiving a faithful account of their proceedings, and the lads too learning exactly what had taken place on the awakening at the camp, when, utterly worn out and suffering, not one of the four felt in a fit condition to stir, Griggs, naturally the strongest of the party and best able to cope with the arduous work, being by far the worst.

But he was the first to recover upon the discovery being made that the boys were gone. In fact, he took note of everything during the first few minutes, and was able to point out that they had taken with them a mule bearing the two water-barrels, and also found and pointed out the

trail the two ponies and the mule had made in the parching sand.

No one felt fit to stir, and the beasts of burden seemed to be in worse plight than their masters.

But the doctor insisted upon a start being made at once, following upon the trail, and all expected to come before long upon the pair lying dead from thirst and exhaustion at the end of the track.

"We never expected to see you alive again, Chris," said the doctor; "and when we came upon you at last, just as we all felt that we could go no farther, we stopped short, no one daring to approach, for we found you lying just as we had pictured you.

"The expedition was to all of us quite at an end, and we approached you at last to lie down by your sides and die, when Griggs saw something that neither I nor Ned's father had noted."

"What was that, father?" asked Chris.

"That the mule's head was pointing in our direction, and that the trail on ahead was blurred, showing that you had been somewhere and were on the way back. The next minute he was shouting frantically for us to come on, and we did, having literally crawled up, to find you both alive and the two casks full of that which saved our lives."

That night camp was made in the midst of plenty, and the sun rose in the morning over the thick desert-heated air to shine upon the dazzling waters of the lake and the rich forest-land spreading upward towards a range of mountains of a vivid blue.

It seemed to be the land of plenty that they had reached, where abundance of game awaited the rifle, fish in shoals were in the lake, and, most attractive of all, away on the horizon, amidst the range of mountains running to right and left, were peaks among any of which the golden city of which they were in search might be waiting to be compared with the unfortunate old prospector's map.



CHAPTER XXXI

OFF AGAIN



SHORT halt of a day or two only was made by the lake at first, and then an excursion which had been made successfully in search of game having resulted in the discovery of a more suitable spot higher up towards the mountains, a week was spent there in a beautiful little valley, where an abundant stream of crystal purity emptied itself into the wide-spreading lake. Pasturage was there for the horses and mules, and almost without effort food was to be had at the expense of a few cartridges, while very little skill was needed for Griggs and the boys to draw salmon- and trout-like fish to the banks.

In a day or two the perils and sufferings of the journey across the salt plains were forgotten, and careful searching for signs of Indians having proved that they were the sole occupants of the district, the whole party gave themselves up to the pleasures of the peaceful life they were enjoying.

But not for long.

Griggs had entered into the spirit of the chase, the fishing and the search for vegetable food. He was as eager too when the doctor led excursions into gully and up hill-sides of a part of the world that seemed to the adventurers as if it had never before been trodden by the foot of man, and ready to point out fresh flowers, or indications of metal or other minerals where the cliff was

bared or splintered by some fall from above. But over the camp-fire at night, in some rocky nook, or beneath the spreading boughs of a gigantic spruce-fir, a hint or a word or two brought him back to the prime motive of their journey.

"I'm ready when you are, gentlemen," he cried. "I don't say this isn't grand, and that we oughtn't to be as happy as the day is long in a place like this, but we didn't come out here only to enjoy a hunting-party. There's that map, you know."

"Yes," said the doctor gravely, "there's the map. But you don't think this is a likely part of the country?"

"Not down here, sir; but from where we stood to-day after stalking those birds, I could see the mountains opening out in gulch and rift and hollow, beyond which there was peak and point and pass that looked as much like the sort of country as could be."

"I noted the grand scenery too," said the doctor.

"And I," added Wilton. "It's made me long to begin exploring again, for there was no sign of desert that I could see."

"It's a grand country," said Bourne, "and the wonder to me is that it has not been settled. Why do you laugh, boy?"

"Oh, it was only at something I thought, sir," said Chris.

"What was it?"

"That the salt plains were enough to keep anybody from coming as far as this."

"That's it, my lad," said Griggs. "Men may have come prospecting in this direction for gold, but I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find that this is only a patch of good land round and about these mountains, and that if we went far enough in any direction we should come to the salt plains again, shutting it in and keeping people back."

"It is possible," said the doctor.

"It's more than likely, sir. If it were not so, wouldn't people have settled here?"

"It is very far from civilization, Griggs," said Bourne.

"Most new places are far from civilization, sir," cried Griggs. "But look all round here, sir; if a good strong party of men came here with their wives and children they'd make their own civilization, for it seems to me that we can find here already pretty well everything a man could want. See what it would be after a few years of farm-stock rearing and gardening."

"Then why not stop and settle here?" said the doctor, smiling.

"Because we've got gold on the brain, sir," replied Griggs grimly. "We set ourselves to see if that poor old fellow's story was a fact, and having started, I say let's carry out our work. If we don't find out that his map told the truth, I'm ready to come and open out this bit of country, if you like, for it's ten times the place that we came from. Even now if you say we'll go no further, I'll set to work with you; but because it's so beautiful ought we to forget how we're cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world?"

"No," said the doctor emphatically. "I propose we make a fresh start to-morrow farther up into the mountains, and see what there is yonder."

There was a murmur of agreement at this, in which the boys joined.

"Yes," said Chris, as he sauntered away soon after with his eyes roaming in every direction in search of danger or something new. "Griggs is right. It's as fine as fine here, and I don't like leaving the fishing; but I am beginning to want a change, aren't you?"

"No going down-hill again to be roasted and choked with thirst."

"Of course not," said Chris; "we've had enough of that. I want to do some of that shooting Griggs was talking about last night."

"What, the goats up in the mountains?"

"Yes, and those big horned sheep; but I feel sure he was laughing at us about their jumping about the precipices, and running along ledges full gallop when they're only a few inches wide."

"Oh, I don't know; he hadn't got that queer cock of the eye that he has when he's spinning a yarn."

"Well, no; but it was a good deal like throwing the hatchet. Didn't you see how serious your father looked?"

"Yes, but not so serious as your father did when Griggs declared that he'd seen flocks of those sheep running away from people stalking them till they got to the edges of the precipices where they could go no farther; and then jump down head first so as to come on the great thick twisted horns which cover their foreheads, and bounce up again, and go on running along a lower part."

"Yes, I saw. Why, a big, heavy sheep if he came down like that would break his horns."

"Break his horns!" cried Ned. "He'd break his neck."

"I should like to shoot one of those fellows," said Chris.

"Or be below when one of them jumped, came down on his head, and broke his neck," said Ned. "I say, mutton—neck of mutton—leg of mutton! Wouldn't a good roast joint be a treat?"

"Oh, what a fellow you are for thinking about eating!" cried Chris impatiently.

"And so are you for drinking," replied Ned. "You're always on the look-out for water."

"Well, we must drink a great deal in such a thirsty land."

"Yes, and we must eat a deal to keep up one's strength," said Ned. "I can't help getting hungry when we're walking about so much. I suppose it's because I'm growing fast."

"Yes, that's it," said Chris, smiling. "I get very hungry too. It's all right; I won't laugh at you any more. I say, what lots of those little gophers there are here. Look there; why, there must be about a hundred up on that patch of sandy ground. Watching us to see if we're coming, and ready to pop into their holes."

"I see them. There's one of those little round tots of owls sitting there too just outside the burrow. It's quite

comic to see the gophers living so sociably with the little owls."

Chris gave a shout just then, and the colony of little burrowing animals resembling the marmots of the Alps disappeared into their holes with an accompaniment of angry warning whistles, just as a huge eagle came sailing along overhead, swooping so near that a good marksman could easily have brought it down.

"Seems a pity to go away from a place where there's so much to see," said Chris, after a time. "And what for? To find gold. Well, it's only yellow metal. We might stay here and find some."

"Or silver," said Ned.

"Yes, or lead, or antimony."

"Or coal," cried Ned.

"Ah, that would be useful for making our cooking fire," said Chris. "But there's plenty of wood everywhere, and I won't complain. I want to go on and see more. Every place we come to seems more wonderful than the last, and there's no knowing what we may find next."

"We shall see," said Ned, yawning, for the darkness was sweeping up the sides of the hills, leaving the hollows black, and they had had a long and tiring day. "I suppose we shall start, then, to-morrow."

"For a certainty. I wonder what our next camping-place may be like."

"That ruined city described by the old prospector, perhaps," said Ned, laughing. "But what are we going to do then—load the mules with gold, and go back again?"

"I hope not," cried Chris. "I don't want to go back. Why, we haven't shot a buffalo yet."

"So much the better for the buffalo," said Ned, yawning again.

"I say, don't do that," cried Chris querulously.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Yes, you were; opening your mouth as wide as you could, just like old Skeeter when he's getting ready to bray."

"Whinny," said Ned correctively. "He isn't a donkey."

"I know that. He can't bray. He whinnies and squeals; but he tries to bray, and opens his mouth just like you do."

"Perhaps so," said Ned, changing the conversation at once. "I say, doesn't that peak look beautiful? It's just as if it is red-hot."

"You'd find it pretty cold if you were up there," said Chris, giving up making rude allusions to his companion's yawning.

"Yes; that always seems to me so strange," said Ned.

"What does?"

"That the nearer you get up to the sun the colder it is. It ought to be hotter."

"Don't find fault with nature," said Chris dogmatically.

"I wasn't finding fault. I only say it seems queer. I want to thoroughly understand why it is."

"Ask your father, he knows."

"I did," said Ned, "and he said it was because the atmosphere was thinner, the higher you get."

"Then the lower you get I suppose the thicker it is," said Chris thoughtfully, "and that's why it's so thick and hot down there on the salt desert. Oh, my word, how it used to scorch! It was just as if the haze was one great burning-glass."

"Oh, I say," cried Ned dolefully, "I wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Talk about the heat on the salt plains. We're going to start off afresh to-morrow morning, and I shall begin dreaming about what we went through over yonder."

"Poor old chap!"

"Ah, you may laugh, but it'll all come back like a nightmare, with the burning thirst and giddiness, and the black spots before one's eyes."

"That's biliousness," said Chris, speaking authoritatively, like a doctor's son.

"I don't care what it is. It's very horrible," said Ned, "and if I thought we were going through a time like that again I should want to stop at home."

"Where's that?" said Chris dryly.

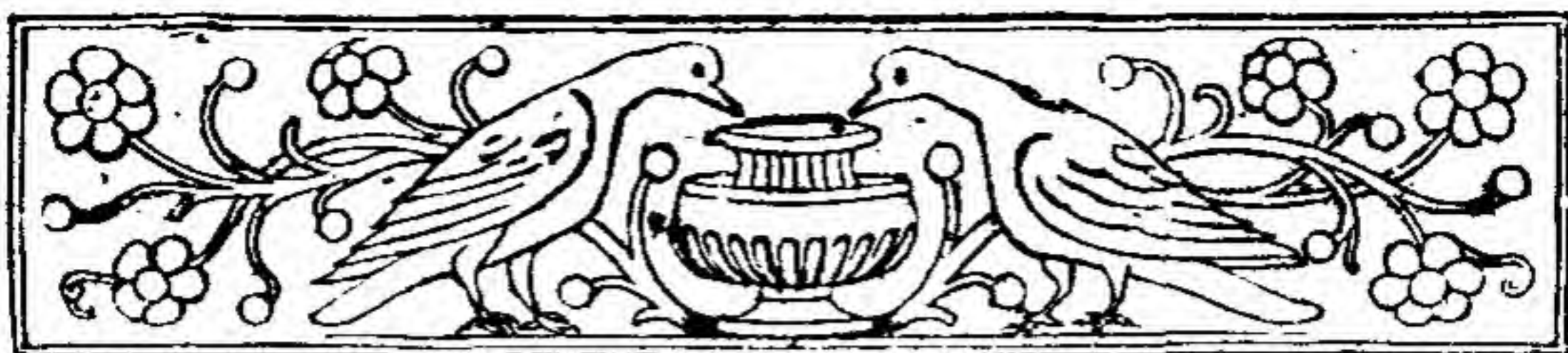
"Ah, to be sure," said Ned, with a sigh. "I forgot where we were. I suppose there'll be no home again till we've found the gold."

"And that won't be to-night," said Chris, as a shrill whistle rang out through the clear evening air. "There's old Griggs calling us just as if we were dogs. I've a good mind not to hear."

But Chris answered the whistle all the same, and the boys were soon after joined by the American, who had come to meet them, and his first words were—

"Now, boys, bed and a good long sleep. We're off again at daybreak."





CHAPTER XXXII

PETRA THE SECOND

DAYBREAK came all too soon for Chris, who sprang up rubbing his eyes and yawning, in response to a summons from Griggs, who stood over the boy like a black figure cut out of cardboard showing against a ruddy glow.

"Why—oh bother! It can't be time," cried the boy.

"Yes, it is, and we're late."

"So we are. You said daylight, and the sun's rising."

"Is it?" said Griggs. "Then it's before its time. There, unbutton your eyelids and look again. The sun doesn't crackle and spit when it gets over the world's edge."

"Humph!" grunted Chris, as he realized the truth that a roaring fire of pinewood was burning in a sheltered spot.

"Have you woke Ned?"

"Yes, and he's growling for his breakfast. Going to have a sluice first? You'll just have time."

Griggs went back to see after the breakfast, and Chris turned to where Ned had lain down on a fragrant pine-bough couch.

"Here, look sharp," he said. "I suppose we must have a dose of cold water."

Ned grunted and seemed as ill-humoured as his companion at being awakened from sleep, and the pair hurried through the gloom to the side of the gully, where there was a soft, splashing roar caused by water falling like so

much foam from a ledge about a hundred feet above their heads into a rock pool at their feet.

The boys' preparations did not take long, neither did the application of their bath. Chris stepped into the rock pool, took a couple of paces, and stood right in the middle of the descending broken water, uttered a gasp or two, stepped out, and began to apply a rough home-made towel with tremendous energy.

"Is it cold?" said Ned, with a preliminary shiver.

"Ugh! Horrid!" was the smothered reply.

The words seemed to check Ned, but the shock had to be suffered, and he too stepped into the natural shower-bath, and sprang out again, to follow his companion's example.

"Feel sleepy now?" cried Chris, with a laugh, and in quite a different tone of voice.

"Sleepy? Who could?" was the reply, punctuated with gasps. "My! Isn't it icy this morning!"

"Yes. Washed all the snarl out of you, old chap," cried Chris merrily. "I say, you did sound disagreeable."

"Oh, I like that!" said Ned. "Why, a bear with a sore head was nothing to you."

"Humph!" grunted Chris, feeling too guilty to defend himself. "I say, feel cold now?"

"No; burning hot," was the reply. "I say, what a pity there are not falls like this all over the salt desert."

"There'd be no salt desert if there were," said Chris, who was now dressing rapidly in the increasing light. "They'd soon wash all the salt away. Look sharp: old Griggs will be shouting directly."

The word "Breakfast!" came almost as he spoke, and as the boys hurried towards the fire, fully alert now and ready for anything, they saw that the mules were all laden but the one which carried the kitchen, as they called it, and this beast was feasting in company with the ponies.

"Oh, I say, father, it isn't fair," cried Chris, in response to the morning greeting. "You know I like to help load."

"Yes, my boy, but we woke earlier than usual, and I

wanted you two to have a good rest, for we shall have a long day."

Ned was making a similar protest to his father, who responded by telling him that he would be tired enough before night.

The words proved to be quite true, for they had a long, long journey through rugged valley, up steep mountain side, down precipitous gulch, and across many a roaring torrent, one of which necessitated the use of knotted together ropes to ensure that the mules with their loads were not swept away.

For in spite of the descents they were gradually ascending into a higher mountainous region which grew more and more grand, while, notwithstanding the fierce heat of the sun, fatigue seemed non-existent, as the party drank in the strong, invigorating air.

The ideas that had been suggested about this part of the country being island-like, rising out of a vast sea of salt desert, were proved to be correct, for during quite a fortnight's journeyings here and there they obtained glimpses in the far distance of the glistening plains over which hung the cloud-like haze of heat.

But whenever after scaling some height their approach towards the boundaries of the island was revealed, the doctor called a halt, and after a discussion with Griggs they struck off in a fresh direction through what proved to be a perfect wonderland of mountain gorge and forest, the home of wild animals and birds, every valley and plain furnishing supplies, while the want of water was never once felt.

"Why, we must have pretty well explored this part of the country," said Wilton, one evening, as they sat resting and watching the sun-glow dying out amongst the peaks.

"A little bit of it, sir," said Griggs dryly; "just to show us how we might spend a year or two."

"What!" cried Wilton, with a mocking laugh. "If we started west to-morrow in a couple of good marches we should be right out on the salt plains again."

"Perhaps so; but this Amurrica's a bigger place than

you think for, sir. We're going south-west to-morrow, aren't we, doctor, so as to get a look-out from that double-topped mountain where the tongue of desert came right in?"

"Yes; that is what I proposed," said the doctor. "He is quite right, Wilton. We have seen only a little of one of the grandest parts of the country I have been in."

"Like some of the Rockies, sir," cried Griggs enthusiastically. "I guess that Mr. Wilton will alter his opinion as we go on."

"Perhaps," said Wilton good-humouredly. "I don't mind. It is, as you folks say, very grand."

"Grander than you think, sir," said Griggs. "I went higher than the doctor yesterday, and I think we're going to have a surprise to-morrow."

The surprise did not come that next day as Griggs had prophesied, but two days later, when after an arduous struggle through a wild ravine, with the perpendicular cliffs rising to such a height on either side that the bottom was in twilight at mid-day, they took advantage of a fall of water to halt and refresh their ponies and mules, letting them drink their fill and then begin cropping the rich grass growing near, while wallets were opened and the tired party lay about partaking with excellent appetite of the provisions they had brought with them.

"This is about the wildest place we've been in yet, father," said Chris, as he looked up at the mighty cliffs by which they were enclosed.

The doctor nodded, but Wilton, who heard the remark, made reply.

"Yes," he said; "I shouldn't care about being here in a storm. I should expect to have the rocks loosened by every peal of thunder, and come tumbling down upon our heads."

"A frightful gorge," said Bourne; "but we seem to have come to the end. It closes in yonder. A regular blind lead."

"Just the sort of place where we ought to search for minerals," said the doctor.

"Why don't you come and lie down for a rest, Griggs?" cried Ned, for the American, after hurrying through his lunch, had gone forward a hundred yards or so to begin climbing up from ledge to ledge, pausing to look round from time to time.

He heard Ned's question, which came to his ears like a strange whisper, and then again louder as if it was reflected from the rock-face on his left; but he only waved his hand by way of reply and went on climbing higher.

"If he were not as active as a goat," said the doctor, "I should feel nervous and expect to see him fall."

"Yes, it is very risky," said Bourne thoughtfully, "and though we have you with us a broken limb would not add to the comfort of our journey."

"Oh, Griggs won't fall," said Chris decisively. "He's going up there to see where the spring comes from."

"No," said the doctor. "He is climbing up beside the fall because the water has worn the gully into rough steps and formed a staircase by which we might get out of this gorge and perhaps find ourselves in another perhaps wilder valley. What's he doing now?"

"Chipping at the stones by the water-side to see if there's any gold," said Ned, who was watching their companion attentively. "But he hasn't found any, for he's going on."

This was the case, and at last they saw him come to a stand as if unwilling, or unable, to go any farther.

"Quite a blind lead there," said the doctor.

"You wouldn't attempt to take the mules up there, would you," said Wilton, "even if he said it was passable?"

"No, it would be folly; too much risk. We'll go back soon, and try some other way."

"Here he comes back," said Chris, as he saw the American turn and begin to descend by another way, leaving the rushing torrent above him and following the sharp descent

into the bottom of the gorge, along which he made his way till he was level with and joined them.

"Find the door locked?" said Wilton, laughing.

"No," was the reply, as the American stretched himself on the grass.

"No? You couldn't have got along that way any further, could you?" said the doctor.

"Oh yes; the place seems to come to a blank end from here, but from up yonder you can see that it doubles back round a sharp corner to the left."

"But the mules couldn't get by?"

"Oh yes; it looks narrow, but not so strait as that. We can ride along."

"Indeed?" cried Bourne, while the boys listened eagerly.

"I half thought we should have to go back, but it's all right. This place only zigzags a bit, and we can get through into the next valley when the beasts have had their feed. It's much better to go forward than journey back."

"Did you find anything when you were chipping up there?" said Ned.

"Yes," replied the American coolly; "there's gold in the rock up yonder by the water, and I found this in one little hole."

He took a scrap of yellow metal from his pocket, and held it out to the doctor.

"A nugget of gold," said that gentleman, "very much worn by the water."

"And the stones," said Griggs sharply; "and no wonder, for it was being swept round and round. One minute I could see it, the next it was gone; but it was washed right into my hand at last. I dare say we might wash a good deal here."

"But you do not propose to stop?"

"No, sir; I've an idea that this is the most likely part we've come to yet. Let's get on. We could come back then if we found nothing better."

Griggs' remarks roused the interest of all present, and at

the end of half-an-hour, spent by the boys in washing the sand in a pool lower down, where they found a few scales of the rich metal, the journey was continued, Griggs leading, to where all further progress seemed impossible, for they were compelled to halt by the apparent closing-in of the gorge, which presented, in fact, an unclimbable precipice. A few steps farther there was a narrow rift extending from their feet to the top of the cliff a couple of thousand feet above their heads, and literally doubling back into this, they threaded their way along a passage not twenty feet in width, which zigzagged here and there for about a quarter of a mile deeper and deeper into the mountains, growing more and more gloomy, and then all at once displaying the bright glow of sunshine right in front, as if it came round an elbow of the way. A few minutes later Griggs led the party into a vast amphitheatre walled in by towering walls that were on the whole perpendicular, but seamed with rifts running up to natural terraces or breaks in the strata of which the vast walls were composed.

The change from the gloom of the zigzag ravine along which they had made their way, to the sun-lit amphitheatre, was almost painful, and the party stood in a group shading their eyes, gazing about in silence, till Chris suddenly snatched off his hat, waved it in the air, and with a shout startled the mules into the beginning of a stampede.

But this was nipped in the bud, and as soon as the animals were calmed down, the boy cried excitedly—

“I didn’t mean to do that. But, I say, we’ve found the old city at last.”

“Nay,” cried Griggs, shaking his head. “This don’t go on all fours with our map.”

“But it’s a city,” cried Ned eagerly. “It’s precious old; but look all along there, and up yonder, and down that bit—everywhere, there are houses with doorways and windows. Why, there’s quite one side of a street along at the back of that shelf.”

“Yes, boys; it’s a city, sure enough,” said the doctor

almost as excitedly as the lads. "Why, Griggs, this must be one of the old pueblas that the Spaniards talked about."

"Yes, sir, that's it, sure enough; a city cut out of the rock-faces of this great shut-in place. Why, it must have been a regular stronghold where thousands of people lived, and we've hit upon the way in. I shouldn't wonder if there's no way out."

"Oh, there may be at the end yonder. How far is it to where that great rock wall closes in?"

"Mile and a quarter, I should say," replied the American.

"Then at the widest part yonder it must be nearly half-a-mile across," cried Bourne.

"Hardly, sir; say quarter, and here and there not half that."

"But the cliffs seem about the same height," cried Chris, "just as if they had been cut level."

"Nature cut them then," cried Griggs, laughing. "Seems to me that it's just one great fault in a bit of table-land."

"But how could it come so regular?" said Wilton thoughtfully.

"Who knows, sir? Earthquake perhaps, or shrinking. Anyhow, here it is, regular rock city such as we've read about; and the old folks made it by cutting away. Chopped it out of the stone and by filling up and securing the openings."

"But look at the terraces one above the other. They must have built those."

"Nay, squire; those regular lines are just how the rocks form in ledges and cracks. I s'pose, doctor, we shan't go any further to-day?"





CHAPTER XXXIII

THE WATER SEARCH

“**C**ERTAINLY not,” cried the doctor. “We must explore this place. But it looks so fresh that most likely we shall find a tribe of Indians living here still.”

“Nay,” said Griggs, shaking his head as his keen eyes wandered from place to place along the vast opening. “Indians who lived here must have had horses for going about, and there isn’t a sign of one anywhere. Besides, if there had been any Indians we should have had some of them showing. The fighting men might be away, but there’d be their wives and papooses skulking here and there.”

“Yes; a city of the dead,” said the doctor, sweeping the sides of the amphitheatre with his glass. “Not a sign of life but some marmot-like animals yonder. And, as far as I know, there are no Indians who build or carve out such houses as these living now, except the puebla Indians. Well, this is a discovery indeed. We are bound to find some interesting relics here if other travellers have not been beforehand with us.”

“Then we shall camp here for a day or two, father?” cried Chris eagerly. “Let’s ride on to the end, and see if there’s a way out yonder.”

“Yes, it will be as well,” said the doctor, “and at the same time we can select our camp. But the first thing is to find water.”

"If there is none we must go back to that torrent where the gold was found."

"And make some excursions here," said Wilton.

"Must be water somewhere here, sir," said Griggs uneasily. "There must have been a strong tribe living here at some time—hundreds of 'em, perhaps—and they couldn't live without drinking."

There was a desolate look about the newly-discovered city, but the bottom between the vast walls was every here and there verdant with grass and shrub, while the walls themselves were dotted with the growth of ages. Bushes were everywhere, while in every crack and cleft, trees had taken root, some being of a pendent growth spreading graceful boughs which waved in the soft wind that from time to time swept through the great depression.

"Let's leave the mules to browse here," said the doctor; "there's enough of this short bush to keep them together while we ride on and explore, for I think we may make sure that we have the place to ourselves."

"I won't say yes to that yet, sir," said Griggs dryly; "not till we've had a good look round. And first thing I've got to say is, 'Ware snakes.'"

"What!" cried the boys, in a breath.

"'Ware snakes, as aforesaid, neighbours," repeated the American. "You may depend upon it some of those gentlemen came creeping or tumbling down from the flats above, found the premises convenient, and are living with large families up in some of these houses."

These words had a strange effect upon the listeners. It was as if all the interest in the place had been crushed out; all desire to explore the wonders of this old city of the past had died away on the instant. As for the boys, their adventures in the desert came back, and clearly standing out were the creeping and writhing poisonous reptiles whose stroke meant a horrible death, lurking ready for them wherever they turned; and a shudder ran through them as if they had just been swept by some icy wind.

Then the doctor spoke.

"That's a horrible notion of yours, Griggs," he said; "but, after all, it is only a guess: there may not be a reptile here."

"So much the better for us, sir," cried the American cheerily; "but all the same I say it once more—'Ware snakes."

"Yes: you all have a shot cartridge ready?" said the doctor.

"Yes," came back—one word, and everybody unslung his double piece.

"The mules," said the doctor then—"we must not have them bitten."

"They'll be pretty safe where they are grazing," said Griggs coolly. "Rattlesnakes don't care for places like that. It's in the stony sandy bits where they can get the full heat of the sun that there is most risk."

"Yes," said the doctor thoughtfully; "perhaps we might leave them as they are."

"And pick our way slowly and carefully, doctor. Shall I go first?"

"I don't like setting you always where there is most danger," replied the doctor.

"None for me here," replied Griggs. "It's my poor mustang who has to run the risk; but I'll try and save him all I can."

"How?"

"Well, I've a sort of idea that I can manage it this way," replied the American, re-slinging his rifle and taking out his strong keen-edged hunting-knife, after dismounting and throwing his rein upon the ground over his pony's head. The sturdy little creature stood gazing at it, as if full of the belief that the rein held it fast to a peg driven firmly into the ground, and never attempting to move, while its master stepped to a clump of young fir-trees, selecting a sapling about a dozen feet high and cutting it off close to the ground.

This done, he proceeded quickly to lop off all the horizontal branches close to the stem, clearing them

quickly away all but the thick top, where he left a tuft, and on finishing, had provided himself with a rough lance whose green brush-like top furnished him with the weapon of offence and defence with which he intended to protect his pony.

"What are you going to do?" asked Chris, who had been watching him intently.

"You come next, and see," was the reply. "Now, gentlemen, I'll lead; please follow in single file."

Griggs sent his pony forward at a walk towards the far end of the amphitheatre, holding the fir-pole well-balanced and low down in front, while, rising in his stirrups, he bent forward, lancer-like, keeping his eyes fixed upon the ground before him, over which he guided his mount. In this way he advanced, still keeping at a walk, avoiding every dangerous-looking spot, keeping to the open, and wherever there was the possibility of a lurking enemy being at hand the tuft at the point of the pole was lowered to the ground and used as a beater to drive out any reptile that might be there.

At the commencement the mustang seemed disposed to start and shy, but a few soothing words calmed it, and as if divining the object in view, it stepped out finally, only uttering a snort or two when the green head of the spear was rustled about, the snorts sounding as if given to help scare any danger away.

"Don't seem to be any, Griggs," said Chris.

"Not yet, my lad," was the reply. "You see, I'm picking out the least likely bits; but one never knows."

"There goes one," shouted Chris the next moment, and he raised his piece to his shoulder.

"Don't fire; he's got well into cover," cried Griggs. "It was a snake, but I don't think it was a rattler, for he didn't talk with his tail."

"No; I didn't hear him rattle. Why did you tell me not to fire?"

"Because you wouldn't have hit the brute, only wasted a cartridge."

There had been no check, and they rode slowly on and

on till the end of the depression had been reached, Griggs's plan resulting in starting off altogether five dangerous-looking serpents from the spots where they lay ready to scuttle in amongst the growth at the first movement of the extemporized weapon—the last of the fleeing reptiles proving its dangerous nature as it hurried away by giving off a harsh, dull, rattling sound with its quivering tail.

A careful examination was made to the left without effect, and another to the right, but everywhere they were faced by the precipitous wall of cliff, carved out and terraced, and here and there offering facilities for climbing up more or less high, the stones from above having fallen from the weakening and decay of time till a glacis-like slope had been formed; but after the reptiles that had been started in the less likely places, there was no present temptation for ascending the stony slopes, bathed in the hot sunshine and looking thoroughly suited for the home of the dangerous creatures.

This exploration of the lower part of the amphitheatre, ravine, or depression tempted farther (search, the party riding on, and after examining cautiously the sides, visiting the upper portion near the zigzag gorge by which they had entered; but only to find that there was no other means of access to the city unless by a descent from the tableland in which the place seemed to be formed.

"And snakes seem to be the only inhabitants," said Chris to his companion. "Why, Griggs, we can't stop here."

"Not unless we can find water," said the American.

"And not even then," replied the boy, "with the risk of getting bitten."

"If there are no more than we started we're not going to give up for that," said Griggs coolly. "Why, they're quite scarce."

"But we haven't been upward on those terraces. They may be swarming there," cried Chris.

"Yes, and there may be none. We don't want to go

up there to-day. What we want is water. Now, where is it?"

"Nowhere, seemingly."

"Oh, that notion won't do," said the American. "Here, it is plain enough that once upon a time this was a big place with no end of people living in it."

"Yes; so my father thought."

"Very well, then; I dare say it was just such a dry, hot place as it is now, and they must have had water close at hand, or they wouldn't have settled here."

"They got it out of the gully through which we came."

"No, that won't do," cried Griggs. "This was the old people's stronghold, where they could be safe and set all their enemies at defiance. Everything points to that. Don't it?"

"I think so," said Chris grudgingly.

"Well, then, it isn't likely that they would depend on a fall of water from which the first enemies who attacked them could cut them off and leave them to die of thirst."

"I never thought of that," said Chris, as, separated now from the rest, they allowed their ponies to pace slowly on, nibbling off such juicy shoots as came in their way.

"It isn't likely," said Griggs. "There must be water somewhere—a fine fall that comes down from the plain up above, or they wouldn't have chosen this spot."

"Perhaps there used to be one, and it has dried up."

"Nay; the place is too green. Water must come on the high ground somewhere and find its way into this great hollow. Anyhow, it's out of sight, so it's underneath somewhere."

"Then we shan't find it."

"I don't know about that, my lad," replied the American, with a little laugh. "There's other senses besides seeing."

"Yes, smelling," said Chris, with a smile; "but we can't find it that way."

"Don't you be in too great a hurry, my lad. We're

going to have another good hunt round at the bottom of these great cliffs, and if that comes to nothing we might try smelling."

"Ah! Nothing but a dog would be any use there."

"In a hurry again, boy. I'd back something else to find water before a dog."

"A fish on dry land?"

"Tchah! No. What was it found the lake for us the other day?"

"The mule," cried Chris.

"Got it again," said Griggs, laughing. "I don't say he would, but I shouldn't at all wonder, if we brought old Skeeter round, as like as not he'd smell out the place."

"Buried under some of these great stone slides that have come down?"

"To be sure, my lad. Now, that's a likely place."

Griggs pointed to a huge gap in the cliff away to their right where the carved-out openings running along behind a rough terrace a hundred feet up the vast wall suddenly ceased as if broken off, and commenced again at about the same height on the other side of the gap.

"Let's go and look, then," said Chris; "but it doesn't seem very likely, for it's all one bank of piled-up stones."

"That have run down from up yonder like those avalanches we read about. Mind how you come, for it's a snaky-looking bit. Go on, old chap; I'll sweep the way for you with my fir-pole."

Chris felt a creepy sensation at the allusion to snakes, and his eyes looked very wide open as he followed close behind his companion, whose pony picked its steps with the greatest caution, the way growing more and more encumbered with stones as they neared the slope which filled up the gap.

"It looks as if there had been an earthquake. What a roar there must have been when these stones came tumbling down!"

"More likely that water had been coming down in a regular stream for hundreds and hundreds of years till all the earth and small stones had been washed away and

made a great hollow underneath which held up the cliff as long as it could, and then gave way all at once."

"You're talking as if a torrent ran down from the top of the cliff yonder."

"Jusso," said Griggs.

"Then where did it go to?" said Chris.

"That's what we've got to find out. Got a hole of its own underground, perhaps, and dives down, to come up again miles away, perhaps, and—— Water it is!"

"Where?" cried Chris excitedly, and he threw up his head, his nostrils expanded, and he sniffed loudly.

Griggs threw up his head too, but he did not open his nostrils and sniff loudly. He only laughed.

"More ways of killing a cat than hanging it," he cried merrily. "Other ways besides seeing and smelling. Hark!"

They had pushed their way in among the outer blocks that had bounded farthest, and their ponies had halted at the bottom of the slope because they could go no farther without attempting to climb.

"Hark? What to—what at? I can't hear anything. Yes, I can," cried the boy excitedly. "It's a singing, gurgling noise. Why, Griggs, you're right. There's water running down below here."

"Well done, hearing!" cried Griggs. "I'll be bound to say there's a big natural tunnel down below here. One minute. Let's try a bit more to the right."

They dismounted, and Griggs led the way, brushing the rocks about with his pole as he climbed up and up, listening the while, for about sixty or seventy yards, and then he stopped short, picked up a stone about as big as his head, and pitched it away forward.

There was silence for a few moments, and then, just as Chris climbed up alongside and found himself on the edge of a deep chasm going down into gloom, he heard a hollow, echoing splash.

"Sounds like water," said Griggs coolly, "and plenty of it."

"Yes," cried Chris, as he listened. "Why, I heard that

dull, rumbling sound before," he continued, as he bent over, "but it seemed to come from high up in the cliffs, and I thought it was the wind."

"So did I," said Griggs. "I suppose the sound comes up and strikes against the rock-face, to be reflected off to where we could hear it down below."

"Would it be?"

"To be sure, my lad. Sound's just like light in that. It strikes against anything and goes off, they say, at the same angle, and then perhaps it's only in one position that you can see it. Same here: there's one part down below where we can catch this rumbling, hissing echo."

"But you don't call that finding water? What a horrible place! How are we to get at it?"

"Oh, easily enough," said Griggs coolly. "You'll have to go down with all the bottles and fill them."

"What! Down there?"

"Yes. Shouldn't you like the job?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then, I must," said Griggs, laughing.

"No, that wouldn't be fair."

"Never mind; we'll argue that out afterwards," said Griggs merrily. "Anyhow, we've found what we wanted."

Clapping his hands to the sides of his mouth, he shouted "Water!" and the rest of the party began to move towards them, delighted with the news.

"Any snakes about?" cried the doctor, as they reached the foot of the slope.

"Haven't seen any up here," was the reply; and the party climbed up to stand at the edge of the great pit-like place, gazing down and listening to the hollow, echoing roar of what was evidently a large body of water.

"Well done!" cried the doctor. "Why, there must be quite a tunnel below here."

"I think not, sir; it's only a narrow path in the side of the place, partly filled up with the big stones fallen from above; but there's evidently a great well-like place going right down ever so deep to flow underground."

"But how are we to get at the water now we have found it?" said Wilton. "I for one am not going down there."

"It ought to be some one light and active, not a big, strong man," said Griggs dryly. "P'raps Mr. Ned here wouldn't mind."

Ned's face underwent such a change, becoming contracted in so absurd a manner, that Chris burst into a roar of laughter and began to stamp about.

"Oh yes, it's very funny," cried Ned, in an ill-used tone. "Perhaps Chris would like the job."

"Not I," cried the boy. "Nobody could go down there."

"I'm afraid not," said the doctor, peering down and listening to the deep, hollow roar. "Then we've had all our trouble for nothing."

"Oh no, sir," said Griggs; "the hole doesn't go straight down. We're all thirsty, and it would be a long job to go all the way back to that fall. We'd better give the animals what we have in the tubs, and I'll go down with one and fill it again."

"No, no; we must go back."

"Before we've explored this place, sir? Why, as likely as not we shall find it is another gold city when we come to search. I'll go down."

"It is too risky, man. Suppose you slipped?"

"Ah, that would be awkward; and you'd have to go miles away to look for the hole where I came out," said Griggs, laughing; "but I'm not going to run any risks of that sort. I've too much liking for old Griggs, as young Chris here calls me. Oh, it's easy enough, sir. I'll take down one of the barrels with some of the lariats knotted together and one end made fast round my chest. Then if I slip you can haul me up."

"I hardly like letting you go," said the doctor, speaking dubiously.

"It'll be easy enough," said the American coolly. "I'll do it."

They went back to where the mules were grazing,

distributed the contents of one barrel amongst them, and then brought the empty vessel up to the edge of the gap, where Griggs set busily to work knotting the hide ropes they had with them tightly together, after which a bundle of dry pine-boughs was lit, after being bound together with a bit of chain attached to the end of the lariats.

The wood was soon blazing brightly, and it was then lowered down, to keep on touching at the side of what proved to be a sharp slope, but only to be shaken clear again and go on lighting up the sloping, cave-like place, till as the watchers peered down they suddenly caught sight of the reflection of the ruddy, smoky light, and upon the blazing faggot descending another few feet after lodging once more, they could see the rushing water tearing along, to pass right beneath where the observers stood.

By this time the faggot was burning rapidly away, and fiery brands began to drop, to fall with a hiss into the underground torrent, some to become extinct on the moment, while others glided out of sight on the surface, giving a good idea of the extent of the place.

"There," said Griggs coolly, "it's all right, you see, sir. We'll have two ropes, one for the barrels and one for a life-line. I shall take one of the lanthorns down with me. Say, young Chris, I hope we shan't have made the water taste of burnt wood and turpentine."

"There's no fear of that," said the doctor; "all that water will be far away before you reach the surface. Are you making those knots sure?"

"You may trust me, sir," said Griggs, coolly enough. "Why, what a fuss we're making about going twenty feet down at the end of a rope. I believe I could creep down those stones easy enough without. May as well have a line round me, though, I suppose."

"You'll not go down without," said the doctor decisively.

The preparations did not take long, "only long enough to make us more thirsty," Griggs said; and then of the two lines made ready, one was attached to the barrel

carefully and well, the other made fast about the American's chest.

"I don't like for him to go down," said Chris, aside, to his companion.

"I don't either," replied Ned.

"It seems so unfair when I'm so much lighter," continued Chris excitedly, "and as if I ought to go." Then on the impulse of the moment, "Here, father, I'll go down instead."

"Shame!" cried Griggs merrily. "Do you want to rob a poor fellow of having the first drink? No, thank you; this is my job, and I won't give it up to any one. Now then, we're all ready, I think."

"What about the lanthorn?" cried Bourne.

"I won't have it, thank you, sir," said Griggs. "It'll only be in the way, and I shan't want it. Looks dark down there, but it'll be light enough when I get below for all that I've got to do."

"But it looks horribly dark," whispered Chris, who stood close to Griggs.

"Yes, from here, because you are looking into a dark hole. When I am down there I shall be able to look up here at the sunshine."

"Light the lanthorn, boys, and tie it to the end of a couple of the ropes. We have plenty, have we not?"

"Oh yes, plenty," said Wilton, and in a very short time the light was ready in case of an emergency.

"Now then," said Griggs; "I dare say I shall be able to climb up again after I have done, but if I can't I suppose two will be strong enough to haul me up."

"We can have three if necessary," said Bourne excitedly, for he looked the most nervous of any one present.

"Lower down the barrel, then, my lads. You can do that," said Griggs. "Just let it touch the water. You'll know when it does, for there will be a tug to sweep it away; but don't let it go. Haul it up a few feet then, and be ready to lower it again when I shout."

"Yes," was the reply, in a husky whisper, and directly

after the barrel was following the course previously taken by the burning faggot, but without catching, its shape allowing it to pass down the steep slope, till the expected jerk was given as it kissed the water, when it was snatched back out of the current's reach.

"That's all right, then," said Griggs cheerily. "Now, look here, I shall want you to lower it again so that I can press the bung-hole under water. Most likely I shall have to do this with my foot, because my hands will be wanted for holding on. You understand?"

"Oh yes, we see," cried Chris.

"Then down I go," said Griggs.

"Stop!" cried the doctor, and his companions drew a deep breath which sounded as if they were greatly relieved.

"What's the matter? Knots loose?"

"No, but I don't see that it is necessary for you to go down. We'll let the barrel go into the water, and it will fill itself."

"Not it," said Griggs. "It will only be battered to pieces against the rocks there."

"I don't know," said the doctor. "We'll try. I don't think we ought to let you go down save as a last resource."

"Very well, then," cried Griggs. "Suppose you try."

The doctor had already joined the boys at the rope and helped to lower the barrel down to the surface once again, to be, as it were, literally seized by the current; and as those above held on there was a strange, hollow, echoing noise as it was banged from side to side for a minute or two, before Griggs cried—

"That'll do. If there's much more of that all the hoops will be torn off. Haul up a bit. You see I must go, sir."

The barrel was raised a little once more, and as soon as this was done Griggs turned to Wilton and Bourne, who held the rope fastened about his breast.

"Ready?" he said.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Keep it just tight enough to feel me, but not enough to hinder me as I get down from stone to stone. I don't mean to if I can help it, but be prepared for a slip."

The next minute they could see their companion descending from block to block, his form growing fainter each few seconds, during which he made no strain upon the rope, which was steadily drawn through the holders' hands, the doctor having stepped behind the others to form a third, while Chris and Ned lay down upon their chests so as to watch the brave fellow's descent.

"All easy going," said Griggs, his voice coming up out of the gloom, and sounding hollow and strange.

The rope glided down, and a strange, harsh, rasping sound was made as the adventurer lowered himself from stone to stone till he must have been half-way down, when all at once there was a violent tug at the rope, a crash as of something giving way, and directly after a deep, echoing roar as of a heavy body plunging into deep water far below.





CHAPTER XXXIV

THE OLDEN FOLK

“**P**ULL, pull, pull!” cried Chris wildly.
“No, no!” came from below. “I’m all right. Only a big stone I loosened. Wait a moment, and then let me go on.”

Chris uttered a hoarse gasp, and turned faint, while Ned felt the hide rope attached to the barrel turn wet and slippery in his hands.

“Go on! Gently!” cried Griggs, and the rope was once more allowed to glide steadily down; the rasping of boots on the blocks of stone below continued, and at the end of another minute ceased as Griggs shouted up—

“There, I’m all right—standing on a big block with the water rushing along about a foot below me. Keep tight hold now. You, boys, ease down the barrel till I shout. Don’t let it go when the water grabs it. Lower away. Right! I have it; now ease a little more and a little more. Now keep tight; I’m going to force it under water.”

It seemed to Chris that he could see everything quite plainly as their hands which held the hide ropes were drawn lower and lower.

“That’s right,” came up in Griggs’ hoarse, echoing voice, which sounded as if he were panting from the way in which he was exerting himself; and then with the barrel rope jerking violently, the boys felt a peculiar thrill and a sensation as if the weight was increasing for what seemed, though only a few minutes, a terribly long time.

“All right!” at last. “She’s full. Now, then, haul up.

I'm safe here, on good standing-ground. Two hold my rope. Up with the barrel."

Those at the surface needed no second order, but began to haul away, Chris's hands now growing wet as a horrible thought made him more nervous; and that thought was, What would be the consequence if the rope broke or the barrel slipped from its fastenings?

He shuddered again and again at the idea, as with Bourne now helping, the barrel was drawn higher and higher, and then all at once was checked by catching against some projection.

"Lower it a little," whispered Chris huskily, and the weight was allowed to descend a few inches, being in the gloom as it went down.

"Up now," cried Chris again, and the next moments were exciting in the extreme, as he anticipated another check when the projection was reached. But Chris's gasp turned into a faint hurrah as the barrel hoops scraped over the projection, and it came up now hand over hand till it reached the surface and was drawn right away to stand amongst the loose stones.

"Got it?" came from below.

"Yes," cried the doctor. "All right. Can you climb up?"

There was no answer for some seconds, and then the American said, in a peculiarly husky voice—

"Coming up. Haul steady."

Three pairs of hands were at the rope now, and their owners exchanged glances as they kept up a steady strain, feeling that Griggs was trying to climb, but jerking the line again and again as if his efforts resulted in a series of slips. After the last the adventurer's efforts seemed to be so feeble that the haulers kept on steadily gathering in the rope hand over hand, till Griggs' hands came within reach, when Chris and Ned each seized one to give the final tug which drew him over the edge of the hole and right away to a level spot, where he sank down, apparently quite exhausted, and with a peculiarly strained look about his eyes.

"Feel overdone?" said the doctor.

"A little, sir," was the faint reply. "Can you give me a drop of the water?"

This was quickly obtained, and the poor fellow swallowed it with difficulty, and then seemed to revive a little, while the doctor, who looked anxious, held one of his hands.

"Better now," panted Griggs. "That's beautiful water, cold and sweet; but I should have to be very bad before I dared go down to get any more. I didn't know I was such a cur."

"I felt that it was too much for a man to do, Griggs," said the doctor quietly.

"So did I, sir," was the feeble reply; "but it had to be done, and I thought I could make a better finish out of the job. I say, nice example to set you two lads. It has made me feel as weak as a rat. Ugh! It was very horrid when that stone gave way. I thought I was gone."

"It was horrible!" said the doctor. "There, you succeeded; now don't think any more about it."

"Can't help it, sir. I feel as if I must. I say, I hope that the people who lived here didn't all disappear down that hole and never come up again."

"It has quite unnerved you, Griggs," said the doctor kindly.

"I don't know about that, sir, but it has made me feel that I daren't go down that place again, even if it was to save my life. There, I'm sorry I made such an exhibition of myself. I did try to be plucky; but that place below there, with the water trying to sweep you off into the black darkness and the end, was too much for me. I believe I nearly lost my senses once. Well," he cried, half-fiercely, after a short pause, during which he looked keenly at first one and then the other of the boys, "you've both got the laugh of me this time. Did you ever see such a coward before?"

"Come along down below there, and see about a fire and a meal," said the doctor quietly. "Let it go now, Griggs. You didn't feel more nervous than I did. I was worse, I

believe, for I felt guilty as well for letting you go down. There, I don't think we shall want to get our water from that place again."

"Why not?" said Ned suddenly. "We could get some up with a bucket if there was a heavy stone in the bottom. It would only mean half-a-bucketful at a time, but there's no reason why we couldn't do that."

Every one glared at the speaker as if wroth with him for proposing so simple and self-evident a means of getting at the water at a time when they had only succeeded at the risk of losing a valuable life.

But no one spoke, all preparing to descend the slope, at the bottom of which the barrel was slung and carried between Wilton and Bourne to the spot chosen for their camp. Here a good fire was soon made, dead wood being plentiful, and over the evening meal, hastily prepared, the incident of the afternoon was gravely discussed, Griggs joining in calmly enough now, for he seemed to have quite recovered his nerve.

"You'll have a good examination made of this place in the morning, sir?" he said.

"I was thinking of moving off," said the doctor quietly, "and getting to somewhere better suited for a temporary camp."

"You couldn't get a better place than this, doctor," said Griggs quietly. "I've been thinking over what young Ned here said about dipping out water, and he's quite right. Don't think of going until the place has been thoroughly searched. I'm quite right now."

"Very well," said the doctor; "we'll have another day, at all events; but I do not anticipate making much of a find here."

"I don't know, sir," said Griggs gravely. "We're getting into the gold country now, and such a place as this wouldn't have been made for nothing, nor be the living camp of a few poor wandering Indians. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find traces of mining with furnaces and crucibles for melting the gold somewhere through these openings. They were evidently a big race of people who lived up here."

"We shall find that out to-morrow," said the doctor. "But what about keeping watch? Do you think there is any danger of Indians tracing us here?"

"Not a bit, sir," replied the American. "They don't care much for these rocky parts; they like the plains, where their horses feel at home."

"But there must have been a big tribe here."

"No, sir; not of Indians such as rove the plains. These must have been a different kind of people—miners and builders. Your regular Red Indian thinks of nothing but his horse, his hunting, and a fight with his enemies so as to get plunder. The people who mined for gold were a different kind of folk altogether."

"Well, we shall see to-morrow," said the doctor; "there are sure to be some traces of them in their old homes."

"I don't care what they were or what they did," said Chris that night, as they laid down to sleep in the dark bottom of the depression, gazing up at the great lustrous stars; "but I don't want any more water got like that. Ugh! It almost had a nasty taste when it was made into tea. Didn't you notice it?" he said, after a pause; but there was no reply. "I say, didn't you notice that the water seemed to taste nasty?" said Chris, a little louder; but still there was no reply.

"Oh, what a fellow you are!" cried the boy impatiently. "Such a one as you are for eating and noticing everything, I should have thought you'd have had something to say about it. Asleep again! Why, I couldn't sleep after what we've gone through to-day, even if I tried."

That was Chris's opinion, but he evidently could sleep without trying, for the next minute he was breathing heavily, and without a single troublous dream born of the perils of the day.





CHAPTER XXXV

IN THE STONE AGE

THE experiment was tried next day. A bucket, loaded with stones heavy enough to sink it, was lowered down the black-looking pit, and was drawn up again nearly full of water.

This was given to the nearest grazing animals, and the bucket sent down again, to catch against some projecting block and tilt out the ballast, after which it refused to sink, but made a jerk or two to escape, and then had to be drawn out.

Fresh stones were put in the bottom, and again were tilted out, but the result of another trial from a little different spot resulted in the vessel's coming up full.

More trying resulted in the adventurers finding that they could depend upon obtaining about five bucketfuls out of a dozen trials, and with this they were content.

An attempt to reach the first terrace was now made, and this did not prove to be so difficult as it appeared from below, Chris finding a spot where the rock-face was a good deal broken away and proposing to try and climb it.

The doctor hesitated.

"What about the snakes?" he said.

Chris started, looked up, and then looked down, to see that Ned's eyes were fixed upon him, and he turned red.

"A snake couldn't climb up there!" he said sharply.

"No," said his father, "I should doubt whether one

could; but there is every probability that one or many might have come down from above."

"Bother!" exclaimed the boy, and he hesitated for a few moments before saying, "If one did fall, or come creeping down one of those great cracks, perhaps, it wouldn't stop there. Snakes want something to eat, and there doesn't seem to be anything to live on up there. Wouldn't it come down lower, after all?"

"Possibly," said the doctor, laughing. "You want to venture?"

"Yes, father."

"Very well, go. But take a good stick with you—say such a piece of sapling as Griggs carried, only much shorter, and use it well as you go."

Chris nodded, and without asking the American, hurried off to cut such a piece as he required, ending by trimming it well and leaving quite a small bush-like tuft of green at the end.

"You mean to go, then?" said Ned quietly.

"Yes. Will you come with me?"

"No," said Ned, wincing. "I hate snakes."

"Not half so much as I do."

"Yes, I will. I'll come too."

"Like to go first?" asked Chris mischievously.

"N—yes, give me the stick. I can climb up there as easily as you can. Well, why don't you give me the stick?"

"'Cause I want it myself, lad. No, thank you; I'm going to have the honour of sweeping down all the rattlers as I go up. You'd better stand back out of the way, in case I should send a big one down. You can shoot it then."

"Some one else will have to do that," said Ned, in an off-hand way, to hide his nervousness. "I shall be close behind you."

"Then you mean to come?"

"Of course."

"That's right, old chap. I say, Ned, I don't believe there'll be any, after all."

"Think not?"

Chris nodded. Then laughingly—

"We've got to chance it all the same. Come on."

Chris led the way, with his piece slung, revolver and knife in belt, and the pine staff in his hand, when Griggs took a step forward, with his eyes twinkling.

"I say," he cried, "it's hardly fair for us if you get chivvying those rattlers and sending them flying over the edge and down here."

"Oh, you must take your chance about that," said Chris merrily.

"Be careful, my boy," said the doctor.

"What, about the rattlers, father?"

"Of course; but I meant where you place your feet. Many of the stones are rotten and loose."

"We'll mind," said Chris, and he began to climb, raising himself a step or two, and then striking sharply in amongst some growing plants, before thrusting his staff up in front of him and drawing himself up again.

This he kept on repeating, and without much difficulty climbed some thirty feet, before an awkward place came like a check, caused by a big stone having fallen, leaving a good-sized cavity.

"Look out now, Ned," he said softly. "Here's a hole that may hold one."

"All right," was the reply, and as Chris planted his feet firmly, one in a hole and the other on a projecting stone, Wilton uttered a warning word or two, which the boys were too busy to heed.

"It's a bigger place than I thought," said Chris, taking fast hold of a stone with his left hand and advancing his tufted staff with his right, as he stood well upright, bringing his head above the edge of the hole. "It was built up once, for the stones were square, and it goes in quite deep. Now, then, look out for a big one."

He leaned a little on one side, thrust in the stick, and gave it a sharp rattle round in different directions, when to his horror there was a rush which nearly made him loosen his hold before he realized what had happened.

But fortunately he held on, and in an instant the alarm and danger had passed away. For the occupants he had disturbed proved to be some half-dozen huge bats, which fluttered out, squealing, and made for the opposite side of the depression.

"Phew! How they smell! Cockroachy," cried Chris. "I say, father, there are not likely to be snakes here now."

"No," said the doctor. "If there were I should not think that you would have found the bats. But be careful."

Chris said nothing, but climbed right into the hole.

"Here, come on, Ned," he cried; "this isn't a hole made by some stone falling over; it's quite a little chamber, with—— What's that?" he added—"A chimney?"

A minute's investigation proved that it was no chimney that had taken his attention, but a sloping shaft with plenty of room for a man to pass upward, and the way made easy by projecting stones.

"You are not going in there?" said Ned anxiously, as he stood close behind.

"But I am. Come and look. You can see daylight. Why, Ned, it's the way up to the first terrace. Come on."

Chris stepped in, and with his curiosity aroused, Ned followed, just as Bourne's voice came from below, with the question—

"What are you boys doing? Mind how you climb above that hole. You had better get a little to the right."

"No, we hadn't," said Chris, who was half up the shaft. "Don't speak yet, Ned. Come on; it's quite easy."

Ned followed, and came in for plenty of dry dust and chips as Chris climbed on, to find himself directly after in a cell-like chamber, evidently cut out of the solid rock.

"Ahoy! Where are you, boys?" cried the doctor, in an anxious tone of voice.

"You look out of the window opening," said Chris; "I'm going to look down out of this," and passing as he spoke through a low opening, he stood in the middle of another cell-like place.

They were saluted with a shout.

"No snakes, then?" said Griggs.

"I don't think so. None here," cried Chris. "Are you all coming up?"

There was no need to answer, for Griggs was already leading the way, and as soon as they were all up an investigation of the place began, during which it was found that they had evidently hit upon one of the openings, or probably enough the principal one into the rock city, where upon the level where they stood some dozens of roughly-carved out, cell-like habitations communicated one with another.

There was a great deal of dust and other accumulation, for in damp spots where there was a chance for plants to exist they seemed to have grown, died, and turned to earth. Here and there, too, as the party made their way from cell to cell there were proofs that various animals had taken possession of the rough shelters and brought the prey they had captured, stores of well-gnawed bones lying scattered about; but saving the traces left of construction, cutting out of the rock and building in, they found nothing to show what kind of people they were who had lived there, nothing to prove how far back it was in the world's history that the rock city had been occupied by a teeming population.

"How long is it since people lived here, father?" was asked by Chris, after they had been wandering about from cell to cell but not finding any way of getting higher without a dangerous climb from the terrace outward.

"Ah, you are asking what has been puzzling me," replied the doctor, "and I seem to be faced by a blank wall built up between now and the past. If we could find anything in the shape of weapons or household implements, one might make a guess; but every trace we have found is of the last inhabitants."

"Well, that ought to do," said Chris.

"But I mean the pumas or jaguars that seem to have here and there turned the cells into caves, and left their gnawed bones about. They may have lived here fifty

years ago, a hundred years, or five. But there is one thing evident, and it is this—that the people who lived here chose the place as being one that they could make into a stronghold, one which they could fortify so as to defend themselves from their enemies.”

“What enemies, sir?” asked Ned sharply.

“Ah, that I can’t tell you. The people here must have been to a great extent civilized, or they would not have been builders; and most likely their enemies were wild Indian-like tribes who roamed the plains, as they do to this day. I want to find something left by these builders, and then perhaps we might learn something.”

They had now come to the last of the long range of cells that they had been making their way through, and further progress was checked by solid rock which had evidently been neither chipped away nor added to.

They cautiously stepped through the front opening, to stand upon the rough, crumbled-away terrace, from which they could look down into the great depression where the ponies and mules were contentedly grazing, and for about the tenth time looked upward for some means of reaching the terrace above, one which appeared more time-worn and dangerous than that upon which they stood; but without ladders it would have been risking life to make any attempt to reach it.

“Strikes me, sir,” said Griggs, “that we’ve left the way up far behind.”

“Why?” said Wilton sharply.

“Because we’ve seen no way here, and we found one there.”

“But I could see nothing likely to lead higher,” said Chris.

“We didn’t look about much,” cried Ned. “We were eager to come along here.”

“Yes, I suppose that was so,” said Chris thoughtfully. “Well, there’s the row of cells above us, and there must be a way.”

“Unless it has been swept off by some landslip,” suggested Bourne.

"Well, we'll turn back now," said the doctor, "for even if we had a shovel I don't think we should find anything that would help us."

They went back from cell to cell, and twice over found the terrace outside sufficiently level and secure to allow of their passing along it, but they soon had to take to the interior again with its low doorway-like connections.

At last they all stood together at the top of the roughly-stepped sloping shaft by which they had ascended, to find that the roof here was entirely broken away by the falling of a portion of the cliff; but they found also what they sought, for there, about a score of feet above their heads, was the evident continuation of the shaft-like hole by which they had come up.

"Look," cried Griggs triumphantly; "no wonder we could not find it."

"But how are we to use it?" said Bourne.

"Oh, we can manage that, sir; eh, boys?"

"You might," said the doctor, gazing up, "but I'm sure I couldn't."

"Oh yes you could, sir, when one of us has been up and driven a peg here and a peg there into some of those cracks. The stones are quite in layers; and after that we'll drive a very strong one in, and tie a lariat to it to hang down like a balustrade to steady whoever goes up."

"But where are the pegs?"

"Down below, sir, growing in amongst those trees. I vote we go down, have some dinner, and come up again after I have chopped as many pegs as I think we shall want. I should bring the axe up here too, so as to drive them in. Why, Chris, lad, we could make a regular ladder up there."

Griggs' proposal was adopted, and that same afternoon found them in the same place, with the American ready for action, and the boys carrying rope and pegs.

And now what had seemed difficult before had grown easy, the American, who had cut plenty of tough short pieces of pine and formed them chisel-ended, driving one in between the natural faults in the stone with the head

of the axe, and then climbing upon it to drive in another, which formed a standing-place in turn, the slope upward of the cliff making the task easy—so easy, in fact, that less than half-an-hour sufficed to bring him to the spot where the shaft was in fair preservation, with its projecting pieces of stone left by the original carvers of the way.

Here the American fixed the strong peg pitched up to him by Chris, who had followed him up step by step, and after tying to it one end of the lariat thrown up by Ned, the two workers made their way up to the intact shaft, and reached the first cell of the next row, some fifty feet above the other, gaining at the same time a better view of the terrace in front, and seeing that it was comparatively very little broken down, merely worn by the weather.

“Here, let’s go on a little way,” cried Chris eagerly.

“No,” replied Griggs; “fair play’s a jewel. Let’s go back; your father will like to be one of the first to begin exploring.”

“So he will; but look, here they come.”

For Ned was close up, being the next to test the stability of the new ladder, and was closely followed by the doctor and their other friends.

“Capital!” cried the doctor. “A much finer view from up here. Why, with such a stronghold and no better way for the enemy to approach, the old people ought to have been able to set all the tribes of the plain at defiance.”

“Perhaps they did, sir,” said Griggs; “but it seems to me that they must have had a regular channel of water coming down from above there to supply all these rooms, or cells, as you call them.”

“Most likely,” said the doctor.

“How would it be then if the enemy managed to break down the channel from somewhere up yonder where we found the hole under the fallen stones? Could the people who attacked them have done that?”

“Why, Griggs, you are making history. That was the old people’s aqueduct, and it is quite possible that when they were besieged the enemy caused the destruction over which we climbed.”

"Yes," said Griggs thoughtfully; "that would ruin the folk. No doubt some of these places were used as stores, and those might last for years; but if their supply of water were cut off there wouldn't be much chance for them then."

"Well, let's see farther," said the doctor. "I can't help thinking that they must have been a strong and fairly civilized race."

Chris led the way in, to find the cell he entered cut out and built up just the same as those which they had seen; but the floor was encumbered deeply with the dust of ages, and on stirring some of it with his foot the boy drew back hurriedly and looked strangely at his father.

"What have you found?" said the doctor.

"The jaguars must have killed a man here, father," replied the boy, who looked on in disgust as his father stepped in and picked up a skull which might have lain there, sheltered by the roofing of stone, for ages. It looked brown and as if very little pressure would suffice to crumble it up into dust; but the teeth left in the upper jaw were perfect and fairly white.

"Ah!" said the doctor thoughtfully. "Here's a bit of genuine history at last."

"Killed by a jaguar, father?" cried Chris excitedly.

"No, my boy," was the reply; "this is not the marking of a jaguar's teeth, but the cause of death, plainly enough."

"What, that hole?" cried Chris excitedly.

"Yes. Look, the forehead has been crushed in by the blow from a stone axe, or possibly by a stone hurled from above."

"Perhaps only held in the hand, sir," said Griggs thoughtfully.

"Why, that's a heap of old bones," cried Ned, with a look of horror; "the dust's full of them."

"Yes," said the doctor, moving the relics carefully with the butt of his rifle for fragments that were fully defined as to shape to fall together as mere dust and hide portions below. "There's another skull," continued the examiner

"crushed in more than the first. A finely-preserved specimen, for, in spite of that hole, it shows the shape of the relic—a low forehead, retreating very rapidly, the brows very bony and heavy, and the cheek-bones widely prominent."

"That's not the same shaped skull as the first," said Bourne quickly.

"Certainly not," replied the doctor. "I should say it belonged to a fiercer, more savage race of man, who might have been an ancestor of the present Indians of the plains."

"Then that was one of the enemy, father," said Chris decidedly, "and he got it in the attack."

"Possibly," said the doctor, looking strangely at his son. "He seems to have got *it*, Chris, but that doesn't sound to me a very scientific way of describing the antique remains."

Chris turned very red, and pressed some of the dust aside with his foot, laying bare the side of another of the ghastly relics.

"And that's like the first," cried the doctor, bending forward to pick it up, a skull looking whiter than either of the others. "Certainly this is of a different race, Bourne, and the owner died in the same way, the brow crushed.—Look at that."

The rest were already looking, and saw what caused the doctor's abrupt exclamation, for as he took up the skull the back portion fell away and the front dropped apart into so much crumbling dust.

"We're looking down at the remains of a desperate fight, sir, I should say," said Griggs thoughtfully. "It's just as if there had been a stand made here."

"Come on into the next place," said the doctor eagerly; "but keep close to the wall, following my steps. Ah! it's impossible to avoid crushing the remains," he continued, as he sidled along, leaving his foot-prints in the soft dust which lay thick.

"I say, Chris, isn't this very horrid?" whispered Ned, as the boys followed last towards the low doorway opposite to that by which they had entered.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Chris thoughtfully; "but it makes one think of ever so far back when all this dust must have been alive—all fierce men, fighting, some to kill, others to save their lives. I don't know; it doesn't seem so very horrid, though I don't like treading on all their dust—and—and——"

"Bones," suggested Ned.

"No; because they're not bones now, only the shape of bones. See how that all crumbled away when my father picked it up. Dust and ashes, we ought to call it. Do you want to go back?"

"N—no, I think not. I say, what a fight it must have been!"

"Yes," said Chris, with a deep breath that sounded like a sigh. "One seems to fancy one can see the men who had the white skulls being driven back from this cell into that one, and I shouldn't wonder if we find that——"

"Yes," came the doctor's voice from the next place, "it's wonderfully interesting. The civilized men must have been making a desperate stand here, and I fully expect that we shall find that they were driven back from cell to cell. Yes," he said, with his voice growing fainter. "What do you say, Griggs?"

"It's worse in here, sir, and—yes, worse still in the next place."

"Driven back from cell to cell," cried the doctor, "and it's my impression that we shall find the remains of women and children in the farthest one. We shall hit upon the scene of a terrible massacre—the destruction of the race who built up this place."

The boys had joined the speakers now, just in time to hear Wilton speak—

"But I say, Lee, aren't you letting your imagination carry you a little too far?"

"I think not," replied the doctor quietly. "Look here; you cannot call this imagination. Small as the space is in these rock chambers, there are the remains of scores of men who fought desperately for their lives. To me it seems like a vivid reproduction of the past."

"How far back?" said Bourne.

"Ah, that is beyond me. How long would it take these bones to decay to this extent as they lay here just as their owners fell? It is a question that no man can answer—one dependent upon the action of the air in a climate like this, with the remains sheltered from sun and rain, to gradually pass away into dust. You can see plainly enough that these are not the remains found in some burial place, added to year after year, age after age. This slaughter must have been the work of only a few hours, and the people lie piled up as they fell. Let's go on."

Cell after cell was entered, with the remains lying thick as the warriors had fallen, the searchers continuing the examination to the very end, and then gladly stepping out on to the terrace, to stand there in the broad daylight, the air seeming to feel fresh and clear after what they had gone through.

"A strange bit of history," said the doctor thoughtfully. "We know now and think how this bit of civilization came to an end; but we have discovered no weapons of war to help us to give a date to the siege."

"But we haven't half done our search yet, sir," said Griggs. "There's another terrace above this, you see," and he pointed up to where there had been another row of the cells formed in the rock-face, these latter standing back a little and evidently being the last, for above them the cliff projected like a gigantic eave, as far as they could see, from end to end.

"Who votes that we give up now and leave the examination till another day?" said Bourne, who had seemed more and more enthusiastic as the search went on.

There was no reply.

"Who votes that we try and get up to the next stage?"

Hands went up, and Ned shouted eagerly—

"Everybody."

"Let's get back, then," said the doctor; "but we'll keep out here on the terrace as far as we can. It is gruesome work trampling amongst the ashes of the fallen, interesting as it all is."

"I suppose we shall find another of those chimney-like flights of steps," said Wilton; "but I was too much taken up with what we were doing to notice."

"I hope so," replied the doctor, "but I saw nothing. I fancy, though, that this was the only way up into the town or city, and, judging by the appearance of the next terrace, it will be the last."

"Then we shall be able to get on to the top of the cliffs this way, sir," said Griggs.

"I really can't say yet," was the reply. "Let's find the next shaft first, and see how far it goes."

They kept along the terrace where they could, but here and there the falling away of stones rendered it necessary for them to re-enter a cell and keep for a little distance along by the inner passage. But at last the first cell of the series was reached, and directly after they were standing at the top of the second stairway and looking about vainly for a third—the one that should give them a passage to the third floor of dwelling-places.

"There must be a way," said Griggs, as he stood scratching his head, "but I'm a bit puzzled. The upper rocks hang over here, and there seems to be no sign of anything having broken away."

"Let's look in the first cell again," said Chris; "perhaps it begins in there."

They stepped in to where the ashes lay piled up and forming a slope on one side reaching half-way up the back wall, this portion not having been disturbed.

"No way out of this place except into the next chamber," said Griggs. "We shall have to look somewhere else. But didn't you say we had found no weapons yet, sir?" he continued, addressing the doctor.

"Yes; you have not seen any?"

"Looks like a couple of those stone axes yonder," said Griggs, pointing to the back of the sloping heap. "I'll get them."

He took a couple of steps, and his feet sank in some depth. Then quickly taking another and another to preserve his equilibrium, he uttered a cry of annoyance, for

his weight had set the whole of the heap of dust in motion, bringing part into the cell where they stood, while the rest glided like sand upon a slope, evidently sinking through a similar opening to that which led into the next chamber, but here formed in the wall exactly opposite to the window looking out on to the terrace.

“Lend us a hand,” cried Griggs, and he snatched at one of those stretched out to his aid, following the rest in a hurried flight out of the place, for the whole of the ashes and bones were in motion and ran out through the back with a soft rushing sound.





CHAPTER XXXVI

IT WAS ALL A DREAM

“**U**GH! the dust!” cried Bourne, as they stood together looking back through what seemed like a mist.

But this soon subsided, and they stepped inside again, to find that a portion of the heap of remains had glided through an opening at the back, evidently the way into another cell—one that was dimly lighted from somewhere above, and which proved as soon as it was examined to be the way they sought, and not merely a narrow shaft, but a wide opening going upward and downward, the steps being in the wall which formed the division between the two chambers.

There was only a narrow landing at the foot of the steps, and below this the opening seemed to go right down like a square well, into whose depths the remains that disappeared had glided and lay far below.

“A huge cistern,” said Wilton eagerly.

“No,” said the doctor; “the old people could not have stored their water just below the way up to the next range of dwellings. More likely a great corn-store or granary.”

“Yes,” said Bourne, “that seems likely;” but Griggs grunted and said nothing.

“What do you think, then?” said the doctor.

“I don’t fancy those old folks would do much farming

and corn-growing, sir," replied Griggs. "You see, it's a rocky sort of place all about here, with very little soil except in patches, and a short supply of water. Flocks and herds must have been more in their way."

"Then what would have been the use of a place like this?"

Griggs was silent for a few moments, and then he laconically uttered the word—

"Trap!"

"A trap!" cried Chris wonderingly. "What could they catch up here?"

"Enemies," replied the American, as he stood looking down and then up.

"What are you thinking?" said the doctor quickly.

"Only this, sir. Perhaps I'm wrong, but you see this is a stronghold, and I can't help thinking that this is the only way into it. There was the first row of dwelling-places, got at only by a ladder, up which the enemy had to fight their way, and they seem to have killed all that were defending that part before fighting their way up to the second row. There they did the same, and here must have been the way up to the top part, which they tried to make stronger still. You see, it's rather a ticklish bit up the side there, and plenty of room all round for those who defended the place to use spears and stones to beat down those who came against them. Just look, it wouldn't only be driving them back, but knocking them off into a hole or trap where they'd be quite done for."

"But if that were the case this hole would be piled up with the remains of the enemy," said Chris eagerly.

"That's so, my lad, and we can easily prove it. I'm going down to see."

"What, down into that horrible pit?" cried Ned. "I should have thought you had had enough of going down for the water."

"I did, squire; but there's no water here. All's dry, and I fancy there's a bottom to it. There didn't seem to be any where the water went down. First of all, though,

doctor, if it was a corn-store or granary there'd be steps like those that go up, going down."

"Certainly," said the doctor.

"And from where we stand, so that the people could fetch up sacks full or baskets."

"Of course."

"Let's see, then," said the American, and opening his box he took out a match, lit it, and going down upon one knee held the burning splint below him.

"No steps here," he cried, jerking the nearly burned-out match out into the gloom.

"Try another," said Chris sharply.

This was done, and a fresh examination made, but as far as could be seen the great square pit cut out of the rock went down smooth and square without a sign of foothold.

"I wonder how deep it is," said Chris, in a whisper tinged with awe.

"We'll soon find that out," said the American. "Is there a loose stone anywhere about?"

"Yes, plenty on the terrace outside," said Ned, and he stepped back, passed out of the window opening, and returned with a piece of shale as big as his hand.

"Pitch it right out in the middle, squire," cried Griggs, and the fragment quitted the boy's hand, to fall with a sharp sound upon stone, as near as they could guess some thirty feet below.

"You're wrong, Griggs," said the doctor.

"Am I, sir? Well, not the first time by many."

"If this place had been as you think, the bottom would be covered with ashes like those we saw glide down, and that stone would have fallen with a dull thud."

"Very likely, sir. That's only how it seemed to me. Shall I go down now and see?"

"No; let's climb up to the next range and see what that tells us; we may find some explanation there. Mind how you go, Chris; these steps are risky."

"Yes, I'll take care, father," panted the boy, who was already climbing. "I don't want to tumble down there."

The height climbed was greater than that of the two lower ascents, but proved to be fairly easy to one whose nerves were steady, and as he reached the top Chris called down—

“It’s so gloomy because the cliff overhangs it so. My word! There’s been some fighting here!”

The rest followed him quickly, and as they gathered, all noticed that there was a fairly wide ledge on all four sides of the place, forming a pathway fairly level, and chipped out of the solid cliff; while, making quite a breastwork at the edge, but irregular in the extreme, stones of all shapes and sizes were piled up, quite regularly along the side farthest from the rough steps, and of all heights in other parts, the stones nearest to the steps being only few.

Griggs came last, and he noted this appearance, and uttered a deep grunt as he pointed out the rough breastwork, but said nothing.

“Stones used for building and squaring the openings on to the terrace, I suppose,” said Bourne, and the boys looked at them curiously.

“What about mortar?” said Ned.

“Think they were for building, sir?” said the American.

“Yes; don’t you?”

“No, sir,” was the reply. “It seems to fit with my idea.”

“What do you think, then?” said the doctor.

“I think the same as I did before, sir. Those are powder and shot.”

“What!” cried the boys, in a breath.

“Ammunition to cast down at an attacking force?” said the doctor eagerly.

“Looks like it, sir. You see, they’ve used most from close to where the enemy was coming up the steps. Perhaps I’m wrong, though. Let’s see what’s been going on here. But first of all, is there another floor higher up the cliff?”

A careful search only seemed to prove that they were now on a level with the highest terrace and range of

chambers, while close by the top of the steps there was ample endorsement of Chris's exclamation about the fighting that had gone on.

There was a fairly wide space between the top of the great square shaft and the openings into the first cell and that leading to the terrace front, and here the remains lay literally heaped, looking as if a most desperate encounter had taken place. Further examination proved that the first cell had also been desperately defended, for the combatants had lain in heaps. It was the same with the second, and as the adventurers went on without stopping to investigate, they found a dire repetition of the battle, and proofs that chamber after chamber had been a little battle-field in which many fell, right on to the extreme end of the range, all of which was in far better condition as to its stone-work than the terraces below.

The heaps of gruesome dust ended with the last chamber only, very little being seen to take attention; but on the terrace, and here in the last four or five chambers, the doctor stooped several times to rake away the soft, easily-swept ashes, to point out proofs of his former opinions, many of the relics he uncovered and touched being quite small.

"A horrible massacre," he said softly. "Children, youths, and these are doubtless the skulls of women."

"Oughtn't we to preserve specimens of each to take back? They would be of intense interest to students of the past," said Bourne gravely.

"How?" replied the doctor. "Touch any of them. —There, you see. They crumble into dust almost at a breath. What we carry away from here must be in our memories. As far as mine is concerned, it is already charged with the knowledge that we have here the remains of two races of people, the one fierce and barbarous, the other the civilized builders and carvers of this strange city of the past. Here it is, all written down, how, in spite of all their efforts for their protection, dwelling, as they must have been, in the midst of fierce and bloodthirsty tribes, they were attacked, conquered, and

massacred to the very last. For I expect when we examine the terraces on the other side of this place, we shall find a repetition of all we have found here. There, enough of horrors for one day."

"But you'll come and examine all this again, father?" said Chris excitedly.

"Yes, I should like to come too," cried Ned.

"What, haven't you both had enough of these horrors?" said the doctor, raising his eyebrows.

"N—no, father," said Chris slowly, and as if thinking the while. "It is very horrible, of course, and one almost shivers to think of how the brave people must have fought; but there's a something about it that seems to draw one on to try and know more, and it is almost like reading of a dreadful battle and a brave defence; only it seems to be so much more true."

"Yes, and it's so ancient, father," said Ned, meeting Bourne's eyes. "I want to know more, and to try and find some of the swords and spears and battle-axes."

"I know what I should like to find," said Chris, speaking as eagerly as his companion.

"What?" said the doctor, for Chris stopped suddenly, and seemed lost in thought.

"I suppose it couldn't be done," the boy added dreamily, "but I seem as if I was on the side of all those people who were beaten, and I should like to see how many of the enemy they killed before the last of them were massacred."

"You'd like to count their enemies' skulls, eh, Chris?" said the doctor, smiling. "Yes, I feel something of the same kind; but nature has forbidden that, my boy. You see we are amidst heaps of dust."

"But we may find some of their weapons that they used," said Bourne. "We must search for them."

"I should like to put a word in here, gentlemen," said Griggs suddenly, "for I've got a touch—a bad one—of our young friends' complaint. We've a good two hours' broad sunshine yet, I should say."

"Oh, quite that," said the doctor.

"Well, there's all that lot of ammunition yonder at the top of the trap."

"Yes," said the doctor; "I begin to think you're right about that, Griggs."

"And seeing what a stand the poor people made here, fighting from room to room—or house to house, I suppose I ought to call it—I can't help thinking that there was something pretty desperate went on before they let the enemy get up those steps."

"No doubt," said the doctor, "and that accounts for so many of the stones of that breastwork being missing."

"That's right, sir. Well, I want to go down into that hole with a big light, and see what's at the bottom there. I'm reckoning that we could find out what kind of weapons the enemy had to fight against the stones."

"Yes," cried Ned; "their swords and——"

"Well, I don't know about swords, squire," said the American dryly, "but they must have had something to fight with. I vote that we go and see."

This was agreed to without hesitation on the doctor's part, and the party made their way back to the top of the steps.

There was a pause here while all walked along the four sides, where hundreds of stones averaging the size of a man's head lay just as they had been placed ages before; and then the descent was made to the opening at the side where the heap of dust had disappeared, and a short consultation took place.

"You'll have to give up for to-day, Griggs," said the doctor; "it's as black as ink down there at the bottom."

"That's what I've been thinking, sir," said Griggs. "One must have a lanthorn for this job, and by the time I've been to fetch it, got back here with another rope or two, and lit up ready for work, another hour will have slipped away; so if Chris and Ned here will promise not to tell me that I'm too much scared to go, I think I'll give it up for to-night."

"You may take it for granted that no one will even dream of such a thing," said the doctor quietly; "and I

think it will be much wiser to give up. We've done quite enough for one day. Every one for camp, a good wash, and a hearty meal."

An hour later they were seated round their camp-fire, talking over the adventures of the day, and that night almost the same dream disturbed the slumbers of both boys, whose minds overleaped the long roll of ages which had elapsed, and conjured up for them the rock city occupied by a busy population. Then came the alarm of danger, the surprise made by the active enemy, and then the fierce defence of the first standing, the fight on the lower terrace, and the desperate defence of cell after cell. Then the fight for the next, and afterwards the escalading of the staircase in the great square hole, down into which Chris seemed to see scores of fierce-looking Indian warriors beaten by the stones cast from above.

Worst of all in the dream was the final slaughter along the last platform, a sight so horribly real that Chris woke up suddenly, bathed in perspiration, and suffering an agony of excitement before he could force himself to believe it was all a dream.





CHAPTER XXXVII

IN THE OLD STRONGHOLD

THE morning broke fresh and cool, and after a good meal a start was made for the top stairway, Griggs being armed with two lanthorns, while Chris carried ropes, and an iron bar fell to Ned's lot, the intention being to drive the chisel-shaped end between two stones or into some crack, so that the rope might be safely held for the adventurer's descent.

That which had seemed long and wearisome the day before looked easy now, and they were not long in reaching the slope leading to the first ascent, where the party paused to look back along the depression to where the animals were browsing contentedly enough, and the remains of the camp-fire sent up a tiny column of thin blue smoke.

The ranges of open cells were on their right, terrace above terrace, all looking so grey and peaceful, with tree, shrub, and tuft of green flourishing in the various cracks, that it was difficult to connect the place with the horrors their search had unveiled.

"It looks from here," said Bourne, "like the home of so many human bees who had built their peaceful city against the sides of the cliffs. Do you think we shall find that similar horrors were perpetrated over yonder?"

"If the opposite cells were occupied at the same time I'm afraid there is no doubt about it. We'll find out the

ascent to those terraces, if we can, to-morrow or next day. I wish we could come upon one of the chambers just as it was occupied by its owner."

"I dessay we could find a lot of things here on this side," said Griggs quietly to the boys, who generally kept with him for companion, "but it would be an unked job with shovel and sieve to clear out one of those cells."

"A what job?" said Chris.

"Unked, my lad. That's what a Somersetshire chap I once knew used to call anything dismal and melancholy. This is going to be an unked job this morning, I can tell you, for if it wasn't for the feeling of curiosity to know all about these people I should be ready to pitch it over."

"Well, do," said Chris, "and leave it to Ned and me."

"'Tisn't a fit job for boys," said Griggs.

"It isn't a fit job for anybody," said Ned, "but we'd do it because it's learned and wonderful. Oh, I think it's very fine."

"P'r'aps it is," said Griggs coolly, "but you're not going to take the job out of my hands, and so I tell you. Just hark at him, Chris; he has got the idea in his head that he's going to discover swords with golden sheaths, and belts thick with precious stones; helmets with plumes of feathers, and rich and costly armour."

"Not such a noodle," said Ned, whose cheeks had turned very red, for though not so extravagant as the American painted, he was fain to own to himself that he had some such ideas in connection with the dusky warriors who had stormed the place.

"I got thinking a deal of it though last night after I lay down," said Griggs, who did not care to carry his taunts any further after seeing the colour of Ned's face, "and I was precious glad that I didn't go down with only a few matches for light. I got dreaming about it afterwards."

"What, about the old fighting men? The dead?"

"No. About what might be there all alive."

"What!" cried Chris. "Not about snakes?"

"But I did, my lad; and I kept on waking up and then going to sleep and dreaming the same thing again. I

never saw such big ones alive as I saw creeping along the bottom of that great square hole, getting into the corners and squirming up one till they nearly stood upon their tails, and then fell over sideways with a crack that sent the dust flying."

"Horrid!" said Chris.

"Yes. They're not nice things to dream about—snakes—because of the waking up."

"Yes, I know," cried Chris eagerly. "You fancy that you really have them about you, and feel as if you can't believe it was only a dream."

"You never felt like that?" cried Griggs.

"Yes, I have, more than once."

"Well, that's strange, because it's just how I felt over and over again last night, and it quite set me against the job."

"But now it is morning and we're all awake and rested you don't think it's likely that there are any rattlers down in that hole?"

"I do think it's very likely, my lad," said the American gravely. "Give one a rocky place out in the desert where the hot sun shines, and there's no one to interfere with them, and you're pretty sure to find some of those gentlemen. I wonder we haven't seen more."

"I don't like the idea of your going down, Griggs," said Chris.

"Forward there," cried the doctor from below, as he finished a long look at the edge of the cliff, sweeping it with his glass and wondering whether they could reach the tableland in which the depression stood like a chasm split in a blue, rocky desert.

"Yes," he said sharply, changing the course of his thoughts, "we must explore the other side of this great chasm, but let's finish one side first."

He was content to let Chris take the lead, and his friends smilingly gave way, humouring him, as they called it to themselves, Bourne good-temperedly taking it all as a matter of course, and feeling in nowise jealous on behalf of his own son. Wilton had on one occasion said

something about favouritism, but Bourne had only laughed.

"Oh, let the boys alone," he said, "and let them settle the supremacy between them. That will be all right. Chris is as honest and frank as the day. You must have seen that."

"Seen what?"

"Why, that the boy's generous at heart. He bullies Ned horribly sometimes, and then afterwards he seems to repent and behaves like a lamb, while Ned turns dog."

So it was that in this matter of the exploration Chris led with his companion, and Griggs followed next, as if he were their henchman, while the three friends came last.

The ascents were made with spirit till all stood in the chamber at the back of which the opening led into the side of the square pit, and here, while the doctor thoughtfully turned over and examined some of the remains still left, Griggs lit the lanthorn he had brought, and Ned tied one end of a hide rope to it, ready for the lowering down, while Chris had stepped through the hole and stood on the broad ledge at the foot of the rough projections in the stone wall that acted as steps.

"It must have been awful," he said aloud suddenly, as he stood peering up through the twilight at the remains of the piled-up stones at the top.

"What must have been awful?" asked Wilton, stepping out to his side.

"Why, that fight when the Indians climbed up these steps, with the other people raining down big stones on their heads."

"Think it was so?" said Wilton quietly.

"I feel sure of it. My word! Never mind about them being horribly savage—how brave they must have been! Why, I felt regularly shaky at having to get up yonder with no enemy to face."

"Yes, it's an ugly place," said Wilton; "but what about enemies down below? Can you see anything?"

"No," said Chris, gazing down. "It's as black as black."

I say, though, if there are any enemies down there they're poisonous."

"What do you think possibly can be down there—one of the fierce cats of the country?"

"No," said Chris, smiling queerly. "Rattlers."

"Ugh!"

"If there are any we shall see them when the lanthorn's swung down. Why, it will be a good bit of sport for you to have a shot at them."

"The horrible beasts!" said Wilton.

"We're ready when you are," said Griggs from the chamber. "The light's burning quite brightly."

"Bring it here, then.—I say, Mr. Wilton, there isn't room for all of us on this bit of a landing. Will you go up to the top and be ready to fire?"

"No," said Wilton shortly. "I'll leave it to you and Ned."

He stepped back to join his friends in the chamber, and then, seeing how they were occupied, he stepped out on to the remains of the terrace, to stand there examining the openings in the cliff-face opposite.

"That's right, Griggs, swing it down gently," said Chris. "You, Ned, unsling your gun, and the first rattler you see give him a charge of small shot."

Ned fixed himself against the wall with his left arm round one of the projections, cocked his piece, and stood ready with the muzzle pointed downward, gazing the while into the darkness far below, now beginning to be illumined by the swinging lanthorn, as Griggs paid out the rope and sent it lower and lower.

"You can see the heap of stuff—ashes, lying in a slope now," cried Chris, who was watching intently. "Look, there's one of those—you know what—looking almost white and shining.—Isn't that something moving, Griggs?"

"Can't see anything yet but that pile of stuff that went down. I say, it's not so very deep, after all."

"Thirty feet at least," said Chris decisively.—"There, I'm sure of that. I saw something move right over in that——"

"Corner," he was going to say, but the word was smothered by the sharp echoing report of Ned's piece, whose flash seemed brighter than the light of the lanthorn, which glowed like a dull star now disappearing in a passing cloud of smoke.

"A rattler?" cried Chris.

"I'm not sure, but I saw something gliding along, and I fired."

"Good boy! Quite right! Sharp's the word. But I say, what a smother you've made. Get in another cartridge."

Click! went Ned's piece as he closed the breech.

"If that was a rattler," said Griggs coolly, "seems as if it was just as well that I didn't go down last night."

"And this morning too," said Chris. "Why, there may be quite a nest of the brutes down there."

"P'raps so. But if there is it must have made some of them sneeze when all that dust went down with a rush yesterday."

Just then Wilton leaned in at the window opening of the cell where the doctor and Bourne were examining a carefully-smoothed, elliptical, cell-like stone with a hole through the thickest part as if for holding a wooden handle.

"What have you found?" he said.

"A stone battle-axe, without doubt."

"Ah, it does look like it. You must save that. You have your glasses with you?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Want them?"

"Please. I want to look round."

The doctor slipped the strap of the case over his head and passed it to his friend.

"Give a look at the mules and ponies," he said. "If there's anything wrong they'll seem uneasy."

"Snake in the grass, eh?"

"Yes."

"All right.—I say, you within there, what have you shot?"

"Don't know yet," replied Chris. "Ned thought he saw a thumping great rattler."

"Did he?"

"It's too thick with smoke to see yet, but it's clearing fast."

Wilton, who displayed more and more his disgust with the task his friends had set themselves, took the glass and began sweeping the sides of the depression, noting the cracks and gullies running up the cliff face opposite in amongst the cell-like openings, all wonderfully clear and bright in the morning air, while Bourne and the doctor, encouraged by the discovery of the relic of the stone age, went on turning over the ashes in the next cell.

Meantime the party at the side of the square pit waited impatiently for the smoke to rise and float out beneath the overhanging portion of the cliff above the top range of cells, Griggs giving the lanthorn a wave now and then, sending it flying, pendulum-like, as far as he could reach without bringing it in contact with the smoothly-cut wall.

"Not much chance for anybody or anything to get out of here again if he was at the bottom, lads. It's a regular trap," he said.

"Yes, but take care, or you'll be breaking the lanthorn," said Chris warningly.

"Nay, I won't do that, my lad," replied Griggs quietly. "But I say, squire, did you aim at its head or its tail?"

"I aimed at the part I saw moving," said Ned. "Can you see it yet?"

"Nay. Can you?"

"No."

"I'm afraid you shot at nothing," said Griggs, with a laugh, "and you haven't killed it."

"I'm sure I saw something moving," cried Ned indignantly.

"Where is it, then? It's clear enough to see now."

"Gone down into a hole, perhaps."

"Or crawled down its own throat perhaps."

"I know," said Chris merrily; "Ned never misses anything. The poor brute has swallowed its own tail, formed itself into a ring, and bowled out like a hoop."

"Of course," cried Ned, raising his piece to his shoulder,

as the light now penetrated well into one of the opposite corners, and without a word of warning he fired again.

"What did you do that for?" cried Chris excitedly.

"To put that reptile out of its misery," said Ned.

"To fill the place with smoke again," cried Chris indignantly. "It's all fancy."

"Precious noisy fancy," said Griggs dryly. "My word, he must be a thumper! Talk about smoke, he is kicking up a dust."

Chris was silent as he stood listening to the struggles of what was evidently a large serpent, while it writhed violently below them, beating about and lashing the pile of remains that had crumbled down from the cell, and sending up quite a cloud to mingle with that of vapour which rose, smelling pungently of hydrogen, towards the overhanging blocks of stone roofing in the square pit.

"I guess I'm quite satisfied now that I didn't go down," said Griggs coolly; "but there don't seem to be more'n one, or we should hear them travelling about."

"This one makes noise enough for a dozen," said Chris. — "I say, Ned, I beg pardon. You don't want me to go on my knees, do you?"

"No," replied the boy calmly, as he made the breech of his double gun snap to very loudly; "only I wouldn't be quite so cocksure that you know everything, next time."

"Thy servant humbles himself to the dust," said Chris, in Eastern style.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," said Griggs dryly; "certainly not till that gentleman below has done kicking it up. Say, how big should you say this one is?"

"Oh, I don't know. It sounds as if it might be twenty feet long."

"Yes; but if it is as long as that it wouldn't be a rattler."

"No; only a thumper," cried Ned, laughing. "Hark, it's quieting down now. Shall I give it another dose as soon as it is still?"

"No; save all the ammunition you can, my lad. It has had enough to finish it off. How strange it is that anything long should take such a time to die."

They stood there patiently listening to the movements below, the lashing about gradually ceasing, to give place to a gliding, rustling sound as if the injured creature was travelling rapidly about endeavouring to escape. The dust began to settle as the smoke floated away, but twice over arose again as after a spell of silence there was the sound of a fall.

"He was trying to get up in the corner yonder," said Griggs.

"How horrible if it comes up one of these angles," said Ned, drawing his breath sharply.

"No fear," cried Griggs. "Snakes can only raise themselves up for a certain distance, and then they fall over. I've watched them often."

"I say, he's getting quieter now," said Chris.

This was plain to all, for the rustling died out, began again more faintly, died out again, there was the sound of a pat or two as if given spasmodically by the reptile's tail, and then all was quite still, while the dust had cleared away so that the watchers could see by the lanthorn's light the inert body of a very large rattlesnake.

"Why, it's not half so big as I expected," cried Chris.

"The biggest I ever saw," said Griggs quietly.

"But it made such a tremendous noise," cried Chris. "I expected to see one double that size. I say, hadn't Ned better give him another charge?"

"No; one of you go up to the top and drop a good-sized stone down upon him. We shall see whether there's life enough in him to be dangerous."

"Hold my rifle, Chris, and I'll go," cried Ned eagerly, and the next minute he was scaling the side, and on reaching the top he walked to where he was nearly over the reptile, where he picked up a couple of stones of the size of a man's fist and pitched one down, with the result that the snake began to writhe violently again, but only for a very brief time, before once more lying perfectly inert.

"No more mischief in that fellow," said Griggs. "I may as well go down now."

"What about the others?" said Chris.

"What others?"

"There are sure to be some more."

"Nay; rattlers are not above showing fight. If there had been any more we should have seen or heard them. I shall chance it now."

"I don't like your going down yet," said Chris anxiously. "I'll have a shot at him now."

"Nay, nay; we may want our cartridges for something more useful than a rattler that has had as much as it wants to kill it."

"I'll drop another stone on him," said Ned. "One of those big ones."

"Ah, do," said Griggs. "Take good aim, and drop it right on his head. Can you see?"

"Oh, yes, I can see quite plainly."

Ned raised one of the heaviest stones near him, and after a gentle swing let it go, to fall with a sharp crack upon other stones, making the snake twine again and writhe round the block, to hold on tightly.

"Why, he has pinned it down," cried Chris. "Good aim."

As he spoke the snake untwined itself and straightened out, to lie perfectly still.

"That's done for him," cried Griggs, "and if there had been any more that would have sent them squirming out of their holes. Here, you come down, squire. I'm going to knot two lariats together and pass them over one of these steps. I want you to help hold on."

Ned descended, the rope was given a couple of turns round the lowest projection, and held by the two boys; the lanthorn was lowered down to stand on the heap of dust below, and the end of the rope by which it was lowered also held by Chris, while upon drawing his keen hunting-knife and taking it in his teeth, Griggs just said, "Hold tight," took hold of the lowered rope, and slid lightly down, to stand below the watchers on the heap.

"Mind the snake, Griggs," cried Chris.

"Tell him he'd better mind," was the reply, as the

American raised the lanthorn and, knife in hand, approached the reptile cautiously, and then the lookers-on saw him stoop lower and lower till he was near enough for his purpose, when there was a quick movement, a flash of light reflected from the knife-blade, and Griggs rose again.

"You've pinned him down with that last stone, squire. Head's off, and he'll do no more mischief. Now then, I'm going to look for your weapons o' war."

The boys could see the bottom of the square place clear enough now, as the lanthorn began to move about; but there was little to see. Upon this side lay the heap of ashes specked with a few fragments of bone which glistened feebly in the light, but beyond the heap which ran tongue-like from the side out to the centre, there was nothing to be seen but stones—heavy stones such as remained like the broken-down portions of the breastwork about the edges of the excavations at the top.

"Can't see no treasures," said Griggs gruffly; and directly after, "There aren't a single shield—no spears—no swords—no breast-plates—no rifles."

"Dear me!" said Chris sarcastically. "I wonder at that. How many revolvers can you see?"

"Nary one," said Griggs coolly. "No gauntlets, no back-pieces."

Then there was a pause, before the searcher straightened himself up and said decisively—

"No, nothing."

"How disappointing," cried Ned. "But what about all those stones?"

"To be sure. You don't call them nothing?" cried Chris.

"No; there's plenty of them, my lads, and plenty o' something else underneath them, I'll be bound, if any one thought it worth while to clear out this cellar."

"But what do you think now, Griggs?" cried Chris eagerly.

"Same as I did before, my lad. I shouldn't like to guess, but you may feel sure that many a savage came to

his end here and lies covered in by these stones. The people who defended this place from up yonder must have showered the stones down when they were attacked. There, it's of no use for me to stop down here. Are you two going to haul me up, or am I to climb?"

"We'll try and haul you up," said Chris. "Stop a moment while I take the rifles and stand them up against the wall inside."

"Hold hard a moment," said Griggs. "You'd better go and fetch the doctor. He might like to come down and see before I send up the lanthorn."

"I'll call him," said Chris, and he turned to pass through the opening, but was met by his father, who was crossing the stone chamber adjoining.

"Here, quick," cried the doctor; "come out of this place! Where's Griggs?"

"Here am I, neighbour. Nothing to be found, only what fell in from where you stand. But there's hundreds upon hundreds of stones, and those who were beaten down must have been buried by what hit them."

"Yes, I suppose so," said the doctor anxiously; "but we've something else to think of now."

"Don't say the mules have stampeded, sir?" cried Griggs anxiously.

"No; they're grazing peacefully enough at present, but there's something worse."

"Then give a pull with the lads at that rope, sir, and let me get out of this. One minute; the lanthorn first."

The doctor raised the lanthorn, and his first act was to blow it out before joining at the rope and hauling the searcher to the platform.

"What is it, sir?" cried Griggs anxiously.

"Come and see," was the reply.

The doctor made his way through the hole and crossed the chamber into which it opened, before entering the next, closely followed by the boys and Griggs, who caught up their rifles as they passed them, dragging the ropes as they went.

As they entered the second chamber it was to see the

doctor join Bourne at the window-opening, while beyond them stood Wilton sheltering himself behind a patch of bushy growth hanging from above, as he stood watching something intently through the doctor's double glass.

"See any more, Wilton?" said the doctor anxiously.

"Scores," was the reply, given without the speaker turning his head. "You can see for yourself; they're collecting together on the very edge of the cliff away there, and at first they stood gazing down into the depression."

"Do you think they saw you?" said the doctor hoarsely.

"Oh no, I feel sure that they did not at first, and I have kept in shelter since; but they have caught sight of something else."

"What?" cried Griggs.

"Ah! You there?" said Wilton sharply. "You had better come and have a look through this glass; you may be able to tell what race they are."

"Perhaps," said Griggs shortly; "but what is it they can see?"

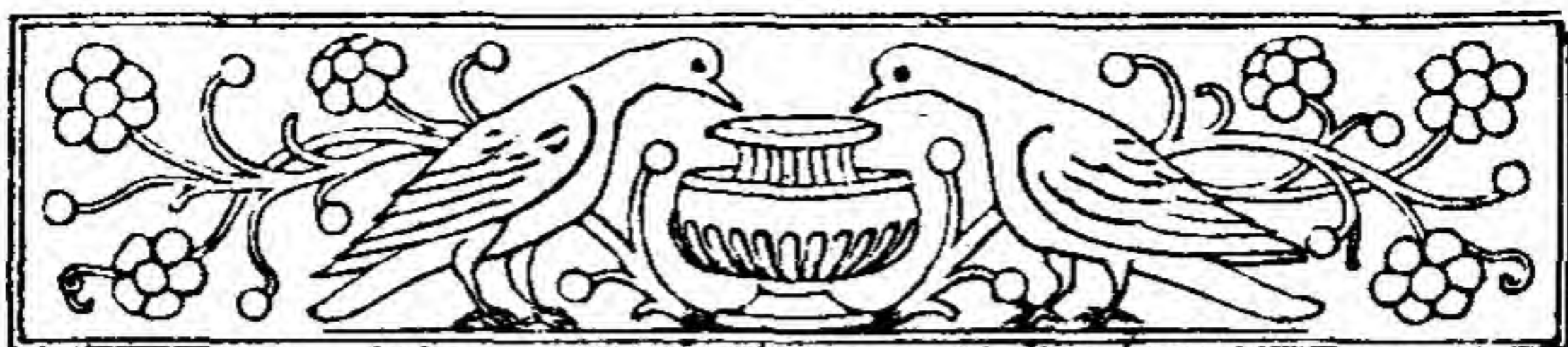
"The ponies and mules."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes; there was one of the men, a chief apparently, pointing down at them. I could see it plainly through the glass."

"Indians, Ned," whispered Chris. "They must have been following us all this time, and we're in for it now."





CHAPTER XXXVIII

BESIEGED

NOT a word was said then for some minutes, during which the glass was passed from one to the other, and long, excited looks taken at the strong body of bronze, half-nude warriors seated upon their ponies close to the edge of the flat-topped range of cliffs, some four or five hundred feet above the bottom of the depression.

The Indians were evidently looking down at something in front of the ranges of openings which formed the old-world city, and it took no thinking, after the party were once confident that they were not seen, to decide what it was that took the attention of the roving tribe.

It was Chris who repeated Wilton's words.

"They're watching the mules and ponies," he said. "I saw one fellow point at them when I had the glass to my eyes."

"And that is as good as saying that they are watching us," said Ned sadly.

"Oh no," cried the doctor. "They can see some beasts grazing in this verdant bottom; they can't tell at this distance that they are not wild."

"Why, father," said Chris, "they have been hunting us for long enough."

"My dear boy, do you suppose that there is only one roving band of Indians in all these thousands of square miles of wild country?"

"I—I—don't know, father," was the reply.

"Then you may take it as highly probable that these are not the Indians we saw before."

"But they know that the mules and ponies are tame."

"How, when they are nearly half-a-mile away? There is neither bridle nor saddle to be seen."

"Oh no, of course not," said Chris, brightening up. "Then, after having a good look at them, the band will ride right away."

"That is doubtful," said the doctor gravely.

"Why, they can't get down there."

"No, but they can make a long *détour* and get down to the gulch, and then make their way into the depression and capture us all, men and boys, ponies and mules."

"Oh!" ejaculated Chris. Then quickly, "How long will it take them to get round?"

"I wish I knew, my boy," said the doctor sadly. "We ought to have explored the gulch and seen how it was connected with the tableland yonder. But there, it is of no use to regret the past; we must think about the present."

"Yes," grunted Griggs, and his voice roused the doctor into action.

"What do you say, Griggs?" he cried. "My idea is to wait till the enemy—I suppose we must look upon them as the enemy—have gone out of sight, and that we then load up and retreat as fast as we can."

"Too late," said Griggs gruffly; "we may come right upon them."

"Yes, if they make their way to the mouth of the gulch. They may be content with seeing that there is a herd of strange animals here, and then ride away."

"Some folk might," said Griggs quietly, "but not Indians."

"Then what do you think will be best?"

"Drive the animals up to the other end of the place, and then take possession of a couple of the rooms here in the face of the rocks, stop up the shaft, and keep the enemy at bay with our rifles."

The doctor frowned.

"It may be a false alarm," he said.

"Yes, may be," said Griggs; "but I don't believe it is, sir. Don't you go and think that I want to fight. Nothing of the kind, but I'm afraid we shall have to. Why, we could keep all that lot at bay for any length of time."

"But it would be desperate work."

"Yes, sir, they'd make us desperate; but it would be their own doing. We could bring up our provisions into the chamber nearest the water, and command it with our rifles so that they couldn't get to it. They've only got to leave us alone and there'd be no desperate work."

"But they may be friendly Indians."

"I never heard of any out in these wilds, sir," said Griggs grimly.

"But they might be friendly," said Bourne eagerly.

"So much the better, sir. Then there'd be no harm done. I'd trust the Indians up north so long as they were not on the warpath, but I shouldn't like to trust any of these."

"Then you'd prepare for the worst?"

"That's the only way to deal with these people, sir," said the American sternly. "If they see that we're weak they'll take our mules and ponies, and perhaps our lives—at once. If they take our animals and leave us alone they've taken our lives all the same, for we could never reach civilization again without our beasts."

"No," said the doctor firmly. "I should have liked to retreat if we could."

"We couldn't do it," said Wilton sharply, as he took his eyes from the glass. "There would not be time, and if we could get away they'd follow our trail and take us at a disadvantage, for certain."

"Yes," said the doctor; "there is no other chance. As you suggest, Griggs, if they find us strong they will fear us. We must decide at once which of the cells we will hold, and get our stores there as quickly as possible."

"That is already settled, sir," said the American coolly.

"We must hold the place where we can reach the water, and the lowest floor here is the one."

"You are confident, then, that they couldn't get at us from above?"

"Quite, sir. The attack, if it comes, will be from below, as it was made once before."

Chris and Ned exchanged glances as they recalled all that they had seen and the result to the defenders, and a blank look of despair settled in their countenances.

As it happened the doctor was watching them keenly at the time, his breast full of anxiety for the lads about to be brought face to face with such grave peril, and he spoke out cheerfully as if in answer to the thoughts he had just read in their faces.

"Yes," he said, "but you forget. Those people had to defend themselves with stones. We have the best of modern firearms, and can deal out death and destruction to our enemies from a distance while we are sheltered and quite beyond their reach. Well, Wilton, what do you make out?"

"They are all gathered closely together, pretty well a hundred strong," was the reply, "and one man—the chief, I suppose—is haranguing the rest. He keeps on gesticulating and pointing down at the mules, and then waving his hands in different directions as if to show which way they ought to go."

"Well," said the doctor, "we must not stir until they move off. They evidently have not seen us, and they may after all believe the animals to be wild."

"Yes, sir; and it's no use to show ourselves till we are obliged. We'll drive the beasts right up the valley here as soon as the coast's clear, and then keep in hiding and try what a shot or two from where they don't show will act. If we bring down a man and a horse or two they may turn back in a state of superstitious panic. It's a good deal to hope for, but it might turn out so."

"At any rate it's the best plan," said the doctor. "So be ready to act as soon as the enemy disappears, and then we must pray for time."

Indian palavers are long and tedious, and the chief addressing the tribe talked for long enough, and was succeeded, so Wilton reported, by others, during all which time the watchers kept carefully out of sight and waited in a state of suspense that was almost unbearable.

"At last!" cried the doctor, as the body of horsemen began to move off. "Watch them carefully, Wilton, and see if you can make out how they are armed."

"That's plain enough," said the member of the party addressed; "they nearly all have long spears."

"That means bows and arrows as well, I should say," cried Griggs. "Indians who carry spears have not learned to use rifles, as a rule. Hah! There they go, riding straight back from the edge. I shouldn't wonder if they have a long distance to go, right back over a plain, before they can get round the mountains. They must come by the same gulch as we did, and perhaps they've got to find it first."

"Think so?" said Bourne, putting the question that was on Chris's lips. "They may be thoroughly acquainted with all this place."

"It's just as likely that they've never looked down into it before," said Griggs. "They belong to a roving band, and the country here is very big."

"Ah, there goes the last of them," cried Wilton, closing and shutting up the glasses.

"Give them a few minutes' law," cried the doctor, "just to make sure that they have gone. Then down to the camp as quickly as possible, load up, and bring everything up to the foot of the slope, unload, and I'll drive the poor brutes up to the other end while you folks get the stores under cover."

"But suppose the enemy come while you are away doing the driving?" cried Chris excitedly.

"We'll suppose nothing of the sort, my boy," said the doctor sternly. Then with a pleasant smile, "If they do come while I'm away you'll all have to cover me with your rifles while I fight my way back. Now then, time's up. Down with you, and away."

As soon as they could get clear of the ruins there was a rush made for the camp, the grazing animals being driven before them to where the stores were heaped, and going quietly enough, associating the sacks and barrels with feeding-time, though fated to be neglected.

The stores once reached, hot and nervous work began, in which Chris had no share, his duty being to mount his mustang and act the part of scout.

His instructions were very few; he knew what to do. That was to ride back to the gulch, and select a good spot, one which combined two advantages, commanding a far-reaching view down the wild approach, while affording good cover and concealment for him.

He started at once, riding off and giving two good long earnest looks at the busy party placing their loads on the mules' backs.

Then a turn amongst the rocks hid him from sight, and the boy felt his heart sink, in spite of the way in which he braced himself up for his task, for the gulch looked more and more dark and forbidding as he rode on, the sides closed in closer, it seemed, than they had been when he came, and as he strained his eyes forward along the trackless way, bush after bush and rock after rock in the distance sent his heart, as it were, with a bound to his throat, so nearly did his imagination make these objects approach the aspect of savage Indians riding slowly towards him.

But a second glance generally resolved them into what they were, fancy paintings, and he bit his lips fiercely with annoyance as he called himself coward and one quite unfit for such a task.

He had ridden onward for some time before he found a post that seemed in any way suitable, for the gulch turned and doubled and zigzagged here and there in a way that gave him sadly shortened views, and he was at last about to turn back to the best place he had passed, bad as it was, when he recognized a corner in front as being formed by a rock that he remembered seeing for long enough on their approach, one that never seemed

to get any nearer, and to his joy when he now reached it he found everything he desired—command of the gulch for quite a mile, plenty of cover to hide him and his pony from the view of those who came along, and, what was very acceptable then, a tiny basin of pure cold water in which his mustang gladly plunged its muzzle for a long, deep drink.

Then with a sigh of relief the scout took up his position to watch for the coming danger, knowing as he did that he had only to draw back a few yards for the great elbow-like rock to cover his retreat so that he could hurry away with the warning of danger and give all time to seek the cells that they were to defend.

“They ought to have loaded up by now,” he said to himself, “and all has turned out splendidly, while perhaps after all the Indians may never find this deep, dark gulch. It was only by accident that we did.”

Chris had just comforted himself with this notion when a horrible thought assailed him. It was this—

All the way he came he had been keeping up a good look-out in front for the approaching danger, and had never once thought of looking up to right or left for some narrow side valley or gash by which the danger might suddenly descend into the narrow way.

The thought was so terrible that he turned cold and looked back, half expecting to see a group of the bronze warriors in his rear; and then his too busy imagination pictured more, the whole band in fact riding down by the gash in the rocks that he ought to have seen, and stealthily coming on to surprise those whom it had been his duty to save.

For some minutes his fancy gained ground to such an extent that the boy was completely unnerved. And no wonder, for the gloom of the great gulch with its perpendicular sides towering up to a vast height, the solitary grandeur, the silence, and the oppression wrought by the tremendous nature of his task, began to be more than his young nature could bear.

For some little time he sank into a state of despair.

To use his own words, in which he thought of his brain power as something mechanical that had been wound up, his head seemed as if it would not "go."

In fact, to use a homely phrase, he was so prostrated by the thought that, in spite of his care and the stern duties of the task that he had been set to do, he had passed some side opening by which the Indians might come down and attack the unarmed camp, that he wanted "shaking up" to bring him to himself.

He had that very shaking up literally, for all at once his pony stretched out its neck, spread its legs widely, and gave itself a violent shake, one which threatened to dislodge the saddle before the beast subsided, and Chris settled himself again in his seat.

"It's all fancy," he said to himself; "I must have seen such a gorge or ravine if there had been one. The Indians must come along here in front. Mounted men can't ride down precipitous slopes."

With this thought to comfort him the boy sat watching the open part in front from his cover, perfectly satisfied that the only portions of him visible to a coming enemy were his face and hat, while to add to his protection, in case any of the Indians' advance guard should suddenly ride into sight, Chris dismounted, cut a few tufts of heather-like brush, and stuck them at random through the band of his soft felt covering.

"There," he said in a satisfied way, as he replaced his hat, "that will look at a distance as if it were growing. I've a good mind to rub my face with mud."

Whether he would have so disfigured himself is doubtful, but certainly he could not, for there was no mud, nothing but a little beautifully clean sand in the bottom of the rock-pool into which the falling water splashed.

So Chris sat there thinking and straining his eyes along the narrow gulch, seeing no Indians, but the bright light on the tops of the rocky sides, while the gulch itself, always gloomy, now began to darken as if it were being gradually filled up with a flood of black velvet in a liquid state.

The pony dropped its head more and more; not to browse, for the bit held him a prisoner from that, but because it was an easy position, and in the silence Chris listened to the heavy breathing of the animal and felt the action of its sides as they rose and sank.

"They ought to have got all the stores into the cells by this time," thought Chris. "I wish I could have helped. It seems so lazy just sitting here. But of course it makes them feel safer. But what a horrible nuisance it is for Indians to be coming to disturb us. I hope it won't come to a fight. How horrible to have to shoot them!—Much more horrible for them to shoot us."

Chris's thoughts became less active, and then concentrated themselves upon the extremity of his eye scope, where he believed that he saw a mounted man standing where there was nothing before.

"Pooh! Only a rock," muttered the boy, after a long and careful inspection. "But how fast it's getting dark. I shan't be able to see any enemy soon, and what am I to do then, for I shan't be able to see anything at all? Why, nothing was said about that," he thought, "not a word. I didn't think about being in such a position, and I'm sure father didn't, or he would have spoken. Now, what would he say to me, I wonder? Something about using my own discretion and acting for the best. Now, what would be the best?"

Chris set his teeth and thought hard so as to decide what would be the proper thing to do.

"Why, it's all simple enough," he said to himself at last. "I'm posted here to give them warning when the Indians are coming. Well, if it's too dark for me to see them coming I can't give any notice, and if I can't do what I'm sent here for I should be better back at the camp."

He looked along the gloomy gulch to see that the light was gone from the crags that shut in the narrow way, while the bottom of the gulch was black with shadow, so dark that any one approaching would have been perfectly invisible.

"Yes," he said to himself, "it's of no use for me to stay here. I can't see anything, and if the savages rode up it would be too late to try to give warning. I'll go back."

But he did not stir, only sat thinking in a fresh groove.

"Father won't think me cowardly, will he?"

That was a horrible idea, one which made the boy's cheeks burn for a minute, until his common-sense told him that no such injustice could fall to his lot.

"Of course not," he argued. "I was sent here to do my best. I've done my best, and now I can do no more. I say, how black it is," he said half aloud, and then he felt blank, faced as he was by another difficulty—how was he going to get back along the trackless path encumbered with stones and with rifts and tufts of very thorny bushes here and there?

It was a poser.

There was a dull streak of sky overhead, in which a star here and there could be seen blinking and looking pale.

"I can't see beyond the pony's head," thought Chris. "Why, it's madness to try and ride along a place like this; but it's horrible to think of sitting here all night, and one couldn't go to sleep. I'm so hungry too, and—— Oh, I say, who'd ever have thought of this? What a mess I'm in!"

There was nothing approaching despair in the boy's feelings then, neither was there anything akin to fear, unless it was a dread of being suddenly pounced upon by the Indians now.

This thought had quite a comic side to it, and he laughed softly.

"They'd be precious clever—ten times as clever as they're said to be, with their wonderful sight and hearing—if they did pounce upon me now. Why, look at that."

It was rather an absurd order which he gave himself, as he stretched out his right hand at the level of his eye, for to all intents and purposes there was no hand to look at, while as to his pony's ears, he certainly knew that they were somewhere in front, but that was all.

"Oh, I say," he sighed, "I am in a mess, and no mistake!"

If I'd had any gumption in this thick old head I should have slipped a damper cake in my pocket. But who was going to think of eating at a time like that? Perhaps Ned would," he added, with a soft chuckle; and the idea was so mirthful that he shook a little, but only to grow serious directly.

"There," he said, "I've done my duty, I'm sure, and though I'm in such a hobble things have turned out capitally, and they've had plenty of time to get our cliff castle fortified and stored. That's splendid, and I won't fidget about the Indians, for they can't come till to-morrow, and perhaps they'll never come at all. But I say, this is coming to search for the old gold city! I believe I'd rather have stopped at the plantation killing blight and scratching the scale insects off the peach-twigs. Here, I say, old chap!"

He addressed this to the pony, but there was no suggestion of his address having been heard, so obeying a sudden impulse he dropped out of the saddle, readjusted the sling of his rifle, and then tightened the saddle-girths before going to the pony's head, to feel the head-stall all over, and stroke and pat the little cob-like animal's neck, ending by passing its ears through his hand, and then passing the back against the velvety muzzle, with the result that his companion whinnied with satisfaction.

"Now, old chap," he said, "we've got to get home, and I may as well be honest. I can't guide you, and I'll let you have your head all the way, and make you up a nice mash of meal in one of the buckets when we get there for a reward. Think you can do it?"

"Yes," said the boy, after a pause; "silence gives consent, as I once read somewhere. Now, which shall I do, ride or lead you? I shall ride, for if I lead you it will be all a sham, and I shall only be getting you into difficulties. So there: I'll trust you. Take your time. Want any water?"

The boy pulled the little animal's head towards where he believed the water to be, but it did not stretch out its neck, so he mounted again.

"Now then," he said, "back to camp."

The pony started at once, but Chris drew rein.

"No, no; that won't do. That's right, turn round. We don't want to go any farther to-night. Now then, steady. Don't fall and pitch me over your head. The way's right on, and you can't go off right or left. *Ck!* That's right. When you feel in doubt about a stone or hole or a bush, stop short and I'll get down and feel about for you.—Well done!"

This last was in admiration, for without the slightest hesitation the pony had set off, pacing steadily back along the way they had come, but with its head very low down, as Chris realized by the steady draw that had been given at the reins.

"Talk about eyes," muttered Chris, "why, they're microscopes. I say, though, I mustn't go to sleep. I believe I could without falling off. It wouldn't be fair, though, for I ought to let him hear my voice now and then."

All the same Chris was perfectly silent, and spent his time gazing hard upward at the long jagged ribbon of black purple, now gemmed with brilliant stars, which spread along overhead. From time to time he looked forward to try and make out obstacles in front, but he could see nothing; there was naught to do but listen to the pony's footsteps and think of what they were doing at camp and what they would be saying about his non-return.

"Father won't go to sleep to-night," said Chris, with a sigh of satisfaction caused by the idea. "He'll be awake and listening for my pony's steps, and—— Oh, how far must it be?"

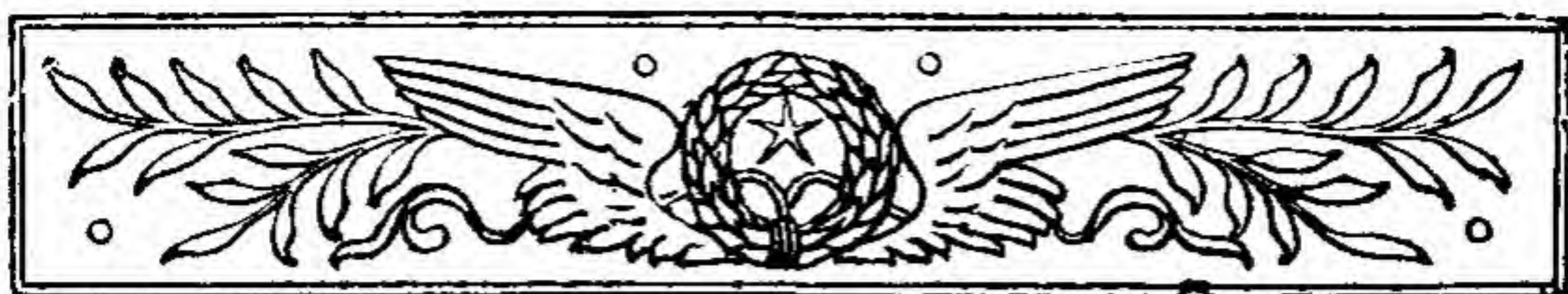
"A good many yards less than it was a minute ago, and it's getting a shorter distance with every step my mustang takes."

And onward they went, cheerfully enough, through the black darkness at the bottom of the gulch, the pony never failing, never setting hoof in hole nor stumbling over stone or bush. It stopped for a moment now and then

to turn aside or to make sure of some difficulty which needed an outstretched neck, a touch with the muzzle, or a sigh; but otherwise it travelled on slowly but surely through the earlier part of the night, while Chris thought till he could think no longer, and began to ride with his shoulders up, his chin in his chest, and a tendency to bow right down upon his mount's neck. But he never did that once, only clung with a dreamy feeling of safety, with his knees against the saddle-flaps and his feet fast in the stirrups.

"I must not go to sleep," he muttered once; but he did all the same, instinctively tightening his hold by means of his abnormally-strained muscles the while.





CHAPTER XXXIX

AMONG THE HORNETS

IT had been a day of severe exertion mentally and bodily, during which the boy's nature had done its best; but the time came at last when it could do no more, and he rode on at that steady walk, sleeping profoundly, so deeply that he did not know when the mustang suddenly stopped short as if in doubt, and stood with ears pointed forward sniffing at the stones beneath its hoofs, wrested them to the right and again to the left, as if there was some taint in the air. Then the doubt increased, and it bore to the right, stopped, bore to the left again, sniffed more loudly, lowered its head and sniffed again, uttered a low sigh, and resumed its steady walk, on and on, for how long Chris never knew, but hours had passed and he was back again in the square hole which Griggs termed a trap, listening to what he said about the stones which covered the bottom while he made the soft glow of the lanthorn play before his eyes.

Then all at once the dream gave place to the real, and Chris was half-conscious.

It took some moments before he realized that he was gripping a saddle with stiffening knees and riding forward, and he couldn't tell why.

At last, though, a mist seemed to fade away from his

thinking powers, and he knew what it all meant. He was riding, and he had been to sleep.

But why? What for?

The answer to those questions came in due course, and he sighed with weariness.

"Oh dear," he muttered, "I wonder how far it is now. Nearly as far as before," he thought, for he couldn't have been asleep more than a minute.

Then for another minute he was confused upon looking at the soft faint glow of the lanthorn held by Griggs in the trap.

"What nonsense!" he said peevishly. "How muddled my head is. But that's a light over there. Why!—I say! —Oh!"

His whole feelings changed as he uttered those interjections, and the tones of his voice were as if the words were positive, comparative, and superlative.

"We must be close to the valley," he thought. "The Indians can't have come, and father has had a camp fire kept up as a guide for me, and I'll be bound to say there'll be something cooking, because he'll think of how hungry I shall be.

"There's a good old dad," he said to himself, beginning to feel bright and happy now, and as invigorated as if he had partaken of refreshment.

"Well, I am glad, and I am hungry, and I'll say so too. I don't care if old Ned sneers when I say I am, and tells me that I'm worse than he is. Oh, hooray! You good old mustang! You're the best pony that ever lived, and I love you as much as a fellow can love a nag. Just think of you bringing me straight back all through that black gulch—me asleep too! There, old chap," he continued, patting the little animal's neck, "I won't forget your mash. You shall have it before I eat a morsel. I wouldn't take a hundred pounds for you if any one offered it; but nobody will, and I don't want it if he did.

"Yes," he continued, as the pony paced steadily on, "they've got a good fire, and it must be very near now. *Sniff, sniff.* Why, it's meat roasting, My! it does smell

good ! Shall I *coo—ey* and let them know I'm so close ? No, I'll ride right up into the light and surprise them. Father will be wide awake watching for me, and old Ned 'll be snoring, I know. He might have sat up too. I should have done so for him, because I should have felt uneasy about what had happened. *Sniff ! Sniff !* I wonder what they've got ! It smells like mutton. How did they manage to get it ? Not one of those mountain-sheep ?”

A shrill low whinny from right ahead where the fire was burning brightly now and casting shadows from the trees and bushes, and also bringing into sight a tall figure seated as it were in the air, till Chris recognized the fact that it was a mounted man.

“Father waiting to ride out and meet me,” thought Chris, as a thrill ran through him, caused by the answering whinny of his mustang.

The next moment, as the boy was about to urge it forward right into the light, there was a hoarse yell, more shadows appeared in the bright glow, and Chris stopped to seize his neglected rein, and drag his pony's head round, urging it with hand and voice to bound away along the returning track, for in the bright light of the fire the boy had fully awakened to the fact that he had been riding straight for an Indian encampment, right in amongst the enemies he had been trying so hard to avoid.





CHAPTER XL

AN UNCONSCIOUS DOUBLE

IT was all Chris could do in his excitement and alarm to keep from crying aloud to his pony to go faster and faster, though after a few strides it seemed as if the rider's fear was communicated, and it was tearing over the rocky ground with all its might, making the stones fly as they were smitten in the furious gallop. But fortunately not a word escaped between the boy's firmly-set teeth. Settling himself well down in the saddle, he felt that his only chance of saving himself from being a prisoner, perhaps from a horrible death, was to trust entirely to his pony, leave it free to go as it willed.

Of the character of his pursuers there was no doubt. They were Indians, the regular savage Indians of the plains, whose cruelties to settlers were the theme of many a horrible story told at camp fire and in solitary shanty. Chris knew of their deeds well enough, but it had never entered his mind that the time would come when he would be tearing through the darkness over the rugged stones of a rocky gulch, flying for his life with an ever-increasing pack baying and yelling at his heels.

For during the first minute or two he had been chased by three or four; after that the numbers, as betrayed by their yells, rapidly increased, till as they secured their

pegged-out horses and sprang upon their backs, fully fifty must have joined in the chase.

They were well mounted, too, upon the tough, wiry horses of the plains, quite at home on the roughest of ground, and at first as Chris tore on they seemed to be gaining upon him fast; but their savage yells, however much they alarmed, had another effect upon Chris's mustang, making the gallant little beast toss its long mane, raise its long, plume-like tail till it floated out behind, and stretching out neck and legs, its length growing closer to the track, it tore away like a greyhound, avoiding obstacles as if by some occult force, and making the air whistle by the fugitive's ears.

Chris could ride well. Many a leading race he had indulged in against Ned on the open prairie-like land long before this expedition, while since then the tedium of their journey had often been lightened by a mad gallop, as much enjoyed by the steeds as by those they bore swiftly along over the level sands; but the boy had never ridden before as he rode now. For he seemed to form part and parcel of the wiry little mustang, as he leaned over towards its straining neck to pat and caress and now and then twine the thick hairs of the mane about the fingers of his right hand, the left that still held the rein allowing it to flap lower against the neck, while each pat and caress was responded to by a snort.

That seemed no time for thinking, but Chris thought hard—harder than he had ever thought before. He was not afraid, for there was a strange feeling of excitement, a wild thrill of exhilaration, accompanying the race, which made him long once more to shout aloud. For himself he thought nothing, but his thoughts were of his father, and the agony and despair he would suffer if it so happened that his boy was captured and slain; and by degrees these thoughts impressed him so that his desires became centred in one, and that was, to gallop away from the savage pack, leaving them far behind, and riding on and on till he could rejoin his father in triumph and tell him that he was safe.

There were moments in that wild race when Chris's excitement grew into fierce exultation, when the stones were flying, the pony's hot breath floating back to his cheeks, and the yelling of the savages began to grow faint; and then again moments when the mustang's efforts seemed to flag and the yells of the Indians increasing in loudness came nearer and nearer, till the boy had hard work to keep from wrenching himself round in the saddle to try and pierce the black darkness to gaze defiantly at the fierce starting eyeballs and gleaming teeth of those who were hunting him for his blood.

These changes came again and again as the mustang tore along, now leaving the yells behind, now slackening or seeming to slacken, till the Indians' whoops were very near, ringing behind and even passing the fugitive, to run echoing from side to side multiplying the burst of cries.

Then all at once the chase settled down into a wilder gallop, as a feeling of terror influenced the boy.

"We must be getting nearer the stone in the middle of the gulch where I hid," thought Chris, "and he'll run full into it."

But the next moment he felt that they could not be half-way yet, and his ears began to sing in the darkness as the yells of the Indians sounded louder and louder, while the echoes given back by the closing-in walls were deafening.

Nearer and nearer they sounded—those savage yells—and once more Chris leaned forward to caress the mustang's neck.

"Oh, go on, old lad," he whispered; "faster, faster, or they'll have us." And then the whisper, unheard in the turmoil of yell and echo, became a cry of agony embodied in the simple homely words which told of the boy's suffering and the despair now gripping him by the heart, for out of the black darkness came a fresh burst of yells that were horrible in their intensity, and full of triumph in their tones, as if those who shouted were certain of their quarry. Chris's heart sank low indeed, for the end

seemed to have come. Involuntarily now both hands clutched and clung to the pony's shaggy mane.

For just as it seemed to the fugitive that the foremost horses were upon him and their riders' hands were outstretched to tear him from his saddle, the mustang made a sudden swerve and what seemed to be a slip.

But it did not go down, recovering itself in an instant, but only to drop from a furious gallop into a laboured canter which became directly after a painful walk, while Chris felt as if he had received a blow which had stupefied him, deadening his hearing so that he only heard the clatter of horses' hoofs and the yelling of the riders as if from a distance, growing fainter and fainter till they died away.

"What's the matter? Am I hurt?" panted the boy, as, passing the rein over his wrist, he clapped his hands to his temples, sitting upright and swaying with his pony's movements the while.

The only answer was the hoarse panting of the pony as, evidently striving hard, it kept on at the walk, full of effort, and Chris began to grasp the fact that in the swerve made by the plucky little steed the Indians had swept by at full gallop, while, unnoticed in the darkness, the pony had turned up the side gorge which his master had passed in coming and passed again upon his return, being fast asleep, when the mustang had stopped to sniff and hesitate, and finally chosen the way which led them right into the Indians' camp.

"Why, they've missed us," exclaimed Chris, whose heart began now to beat wildly in the fresh excitement of the moment. For his head was still confused, and he was trying hard to make out how it was that the Indians had managed to pass him earlier in the evening, even now being too much puzzled to make out the mistake that had occurred.

For in the great darkness of the narrow gorge they were ascending the boy's brain seemed to participate. He could not grasp that by this narrow descent the Indians had gained the gulch directly after he had passed to take

up his position as scout. In short, all he had room for in his head then was the one great thought, that for the present, thanks to the pony, he had escaped, and for the minor piece of easily-grasped knowledge that the panting beast was toiling—literally climbing up a very steep and narrow rift in the side of the cliff; where he was going and what was to be the end, he could not tell.

After a time the efforts of the pony grew less; it ceased to drag itself up as if forcing its hoofs into the crevices of the rock to climb foot by foot. The way was still steep, and the darkness so thick that for a time Chris could make out nothing of the sides; but in time the strip of purply-black sky gemmed with stars became wider, the edges not so ragged, and all at once it struck the boy that they were not climbing over stones, for the sound of the hoofs was deadened.

This lasted for a time, during which Chris began to breathe more easily as he looked about him and questioned himself as to where he was, while little by little the facts came to fit themselves together like the pieces of a puzzle which now seemed very simple, so that it only needed a fresh act on the part of the mustang to make all clear.

Fully a couple of hours must have passed since the wild hunt in which he had been the quarry; but there it all was now, as the pony stopped suddenly, lowered its head, and began to crop steadily with the sounds so familiar to the hearer, at the soft grass down to which Chris now sprang, to stand looking about him.

“Of course,” he said. “We must have climbed up here to what father called the tableland, and somewhere farther on, I suppose, we should come to the edge of the cliff and look down into the valley with the openings facing one.

“But not now,” he said, with a shudder, as he thought of the perpendicular character of the cliff-faces.

“Yes, that’s all clear now; the Indians must have come along here while I was going along the gulch, and soon after I had passed they got down and turned the other way, making for the valley, and getting in perhaps before

my people had secured all the stores and things. Oh, what have I done?" he cried bitterly. "Failed—horribly failed! Now how am I to find out what has happened since? Has there been a terrible fight? Can I go down now and see?"

"No—no—no," came three dreary answers. "Part of the Indians may be down there by the built-up cliffs; the others will be coming back soon; and what could I do in this darkness, with it far darker in the valley?"

"If I only knew what has happened since!" he said, with a groan full of despair, as, dropping down upon the soft turf, half-sitting, half-kneeling, he gazed in the direction where he supposed the great hollow to be, listened to the *crop—crop—crop* of the grazing beast, and wondered how long it would be before the daylight came.

It was long—a long and weary time, for there was no sleepy sensation now. Chris had had his first taste of a very real danger. He could not hide from himself the knowledge that he had been quite near the end of all his bright, hopeful aspirations. The chase after him had been so savage that he had no faith in being made a well-treated prisoner. The Indians had been too ready and too fierce in their onslaught to show mercy, and there was a sickening feeling at his heart respecting what might have happened during his long absence. Perhaps they had attacked his friends directly after reaching the valley, and if so they had probably received such a lesson as explained their savage demonstration upon seeing him.

"It will all be made clear," thought the boy, "as soon as the day comes." But all the same he did not feel at all confident about what he asserted, neither did he feel at all happy about himself.

"How am I to get back to the valley?" he said. "I suppose it would be easy enough to go down that steep slope into the gulch, but I should be sure to find some of the savages waiting for me there, and even if there were none I don't suppose they all came after me. There were sure to be some left in their camp."

"What can I do?" he muttered. "There is no other way into the valley, and what can I do alone?"

He had seated himself in the darkness to watch the stars slowly seeming to pass from east to west, and as he said half-aloud those words about being alone he slowly fingered the revolver-holster on one side of his belt and the hunting-knife in its sheath, which done, he pulled at the strap which slung his rifle, and getting it round to the front he rested it upon his knees, and began mechanically to examine the breech as if to make sure that he had cartridges in each barrel.

They were there safe enough, and he closed the breech and was about to drag the piece into its regular place again; but something struck him which made him get the rifle back into position, re-open the breech, and take out one of the cartridges, before opening his pouch and exchanging it for another.

A curious sensation ran through the boy's frame as he did this. He felt uncomfortable and as if he were about to do some wrong thing, for the cartridge he withdrew was filled with number six shot such as he would use for killing small birds that they could use for their meals, while the one he inserted in its place contained a long conical bullet, and he knew he was not putting that ready in case he should encounter a bear.

He would not own it to himself—he dreaded to think about it—but all the while he could not help feeling that it must be a duty to defend his own life, and certainly was one to try and protect his father and his friends.

But Chris Lee was uncomfortable all the same, and tried hard to keep all such thoughts back, as he once more began to watch the stars, and listened to the *crop*, *crop* of the pony, which seemed to be revelling in the soft, dew-wet grass, whose pleasant odour rose to his nostrils as the animal kept on uttering the familiar blowing sound to drive away insects before nibbling off tufts and grinding them between its fine teeth.

"Poor fellow," he said softly; "he saved my life."

And then he remarked to himself upon its being strange

that the mustang did not go far away from him, but evidently preferred grazing round and round as if it were pleasanter to keep close to its companion, man.

It was a long, long time, during which, without once feeling the want of rest, Chris still watched the stars, before he uttered a sigh of relief, for they were certainly growing paler and there was a faint suggestion of light just where, he reflected, the east would lie. Moreover, he was where he had hoped he might find himself, and that was not far from opposite the piece of terraced cliff where he hoped that his friends might be.

He went at once to the pony and led it with him, now moving very cautiously for fear of danger, towards the edge of the cliff, in the hope that as it grew lighter some one might catch sight of him and wave him a signal that he might take as a piece of advice.

But it was still dark below, and he knew the folly of expecting to see any one looking up to where he stood, feeling in his heart that it was far more likely that they might be lying in wait for his return far away towards the entrance of the gully, ready to cover his retreat if he made an attempt to rush in.

"But I can't," he said to himself dolefully. "It's impossible to get down there."

He wanted to get close to the edge of the cliff, to stand above the ranges of cells facing those they had explored; but it was still too dark, for he knew not what rifts or precipitous places might score the tableland upon which he stood; and the day was coming so slowly, while he grew more impatient minute by minute.

There were moments when he thought it would be unwise to expose himself on the top, for if there were Indians in the depression looking sharply about, according to their nature, he would be showing where they could stand a better chance of hunting him down in the full light of day. But if they did attempt such a thing he began wondering whether it would be possible to lead them a long chase, gradually working round till he could make a dash for the gulch and so join his friends.

He could not help feeling that there was little likelihood of this, and then his attention was taken up by the strengthening of the light away to his right, and he started with surprise to see that, from a different point of view of course, he could look upon the very spot where Wilton had caught sight of the Indians gazing down into the valley before drawing back and taking evidently a long round to reach the narrow ravine which had afforded him an outlet of escape.

It was growing light now fast, as he stood holding his pony's rein, and he began to follow the track that the Indians must have taken from the head of the depression, now full in view, bearing round to his right until they reached the ravine up which he had come. He tried to make out where that might be, but it was darker there, and for some time, eager as he was to locate the spot for reasons connected with using it again as a means of escape, though in a reverse way, it was some time before he could make out where the gradual descent from the tableland began.

But the reason was very simple. It was dim there, the eastern light not touching that part, and for another reason he was not looking far enough away from the edge of the cliffs by about a couple of miles. But as the day broadened the way of escape was revealed in a manner which took his breath away, for there, clearly seen in the pale morning light, was the head of a long line of mounted men, the first half-dozen in full view, the others diminishing in height slowly as they ascended the slope, three-quarters, half, a quarter length, so that the last man's head alone was visible, and growing slowly as it seemed to be rising from the earth.

"After us, old chap," cried Chris bitterly, to his pony. "Now then, are you rested? It's going to be another ride for life.

"Which way?" he almost groaned, the next moment, as he looked wildly round. "Oh, why did we come to hunt for this wretched gold?"



CHAPTER XLI

PLAYING FROG

IT seemed to Chris as if any attempt at hiding would be folly, for if he could see the enemy where the light was not so clear he felt certain that the Indians must have seen him and the pony at once, standing up plainly against the brightening sky.

"I don't know what to do," he said to himself, as he sprang upon the pony's back, and felt better directly. For as the sturdy little animal began to move springily along, fresh vigour seemed to run through the boy's nerves, and he looked sharply round again.

"There must be some way for us to escape," he cried aloud, "and they shall have a long gallop before they catch us."

He paused for a few moments to look down into the valley and across at the towering up rows of broken openings on the other side of the depression, feeling the while that to stay anywhere near the edge of the precipice was only to hasten his surrender, for the distance from the edge to the level bottom of the valley seemed terrible, so giddy and full of horror for him who fell, that Chris literally wrenched his eyes away, to sweep the horizon till he had made up his mind which was the most open and level part of the tableland to select for the wild gallop to come.

"I did hope to have seen some one over yonder," he muttered bitterly, "but I suppose they are asleep and don't know what danger I am in. There, off with you, old lad," he cried aloud, shaking the rein. "No, no—steady; it's going to be a long ride, and you mustn't be pumped out for hours to come. That's better; a nice gentle canter. Well done! How light and easy you do go."

It was as if the beautiful little animal understood its rider's words. It certainly did his caresses, for it snorted loudly, tossed up its head, and then bending it down with neck finely arched, it progressed in bound after bound as if it were a joy to be cantering along that high level ground in the pure elastic air.

Chris gave his mount another pat or two upon the neck, and then settling himself in his saddle he turned his head to watch the Indians.

In an instant he had learned that not only could they see him but they had grasped his intention as to the way in which he sought to escape. For directly after, three of them had darted out of the line and gone off at full speed, opening out the while, with the evident intention of cutting off their victim.

Chris was ready, and after riding a little way so as to give the enemy time, he suddenly bore upon his rein and changed his course.

But as soon as this was seen, three more of the Indians started off to turn him away from the open country in that direction.

Again Chris changed, each time increasing his speed; but in this, and in the efforts which followed, the Indians grasped his ideas, and they galloped out to cut him off, till after trial following trial the fugitive found that his efforts to escape in that way could only result in tiring out his mustang, and so cleverly had the enemy manœuvred that they had cast, as it were, a line round him, a semi-circle whose chord was the edge of the depression, towards which when it pleased them and they felt certain, they could press him back, gradually contracting their line till he was completely in their power.

Chris drew rein to sit watching the enemy for a few minutes, and breathing his mount while he decided as to what he must do.

The decision was soon arrived at. There was the open country with Indians dotted at intervals ready to close in, but all the same that was the only way of escape, for fully twenty sat like statues upon their horses across the open part which gradually contracted to form the jaws of the ravine down which he would have liked to turn.

"I must do it," thought the boy, and his mind was made up. The open country must be reached, and he prepared for action by taking his revolver out of the holster and holding it ready for a shot; then gathering up his reins and pointing his pony's head for the very centre of the line which hemmed him in, he went off at a canter straight for the open, picking out one man as his guide.

The result was exactly what he expected, for as he increased his pace the Indians to his right and left came galloping, evidently meaning to reach him just as he gained their line.

Chris urged his pony on at full gallop, and there was a race, the enemy sweeping over the short level grass, concentrating themselves as it were upon their quarry, and beginning to yell and shout as they tore along. But Chris's movement was only a feint, and the next minute he had wheeled round, changing his direction to one parallel with the edge of the cliff, tearing along so that two out of three of the Indians dashed past him, while as he neared the other, who was right in his way, he raised his revolver, waited till he was as close as he was likely to get, and then at intervals fired three shots, the little bullets whizzing through the clear morning air, and the last, to the boy's surprise and delight, finding its billet with a faint *ping*.

He had only expected to startle and perhaps make his enemy turn tail, but to his utter astonishment the last man's pony stopped short, sending the rider over its head, and Chris tore on, with the intention of passing through the line.

It was a furious race now, for at intervals quite a dozen of the enemy were trailing along now to cut him off, and victory was bound to be to the most swift. But the enemy were clever enough not to trust to the result of this race, for several hundreds of yards out another line of horsemen was tearing over the plain, whirling their bows and spears over their heads and using them mercilessly upon the flanks of their steeds.

It was a good race, during which Chris's mustang proved its speed, going over the grass *ventre à terre*, as the French call it, and, to his delight, the boy was able to pass round the farthest horseman, who strove vainly to head him, as he made now for the open plain.

The effort was vain, for the second line was closing in at full gallop, and seeing the hopelessness of repeating his first feint, Chris now urged his pony on again parallel with the edge of the cliff, with some idea of riding round the end of the great depression so as to get to the far side, and then, trusting to the speed of his brave little mount, escaping there.

But it was of no use. At first he began to feel hopeful, for he was going fast and getting well on towards the head of the valley, which after a gallop he finally reached. The open country beyond was before him, he was bending down again to reach forward and pat the pony's neck, shouting cheering words to it the while, when he suddenly became aware of the fact that right in front, and coming from quite a different direction, there was another party of the enemy, which no sooner caught sight of the chase than they increased their pace, spreading out into a line the while.

Chris began to draw rein, slowly checking his pony's gallop to a canter, and then easing it down to a walk, for he had been gradually edged more and more towards the rim of the great depression, till there was not more than a hundred yards between him and the precipitous descent, which presented an effectual barrier to all escape there.

"They're too much for me," panted the boy breathlessly, and quite innocent of this naïve way of expressing himself,

for it never occurred to him how pitifully small his chances of escape had been in pitting himself, a mere lad, against nearly a hundred of the active warriors of the plain.

"But I'm not done yet," he muttered, as he pressed his pony's sides and cantered on towards where in one spot the smooth level gave place to a rugged patch where the ground was broken up and strewn with stones right to the edge of the precipice for about a hundred yards, before it became smooth and level again.

As near as he could guess he was leaving behind the spot where the Indians had been first seen; but that was only a passing thought. He was, as he had said, not done yet, and in those stones he saw shelter for himself and his mount while he made a stand for a time in the hope that aid of some kind might come, or some turn of the tide occur in his favour.

Full of this idea, he cantered on, and reached the rugged patch of broken ground, his sinking spirits rising as he drew near and found that it would give more shelter than he had hoped for, since no horseman could charge through it; in fact, as he reached the spot he was obliged to let the pony pick its way in and out among pieces of rock eight or ten feet high which looked as if they had been turned up, while among them there were shallow, shady rifts, and in one case quite a gash going deeply down and cutting right through the edge of the depression, being evidently the work of water that at some period or other in the world's history had run over the edge of the precipice in a cascade.

But Chris was in no humour then for calculating the causes of this appearance, this roughening of the level plain. He did wonder that he had not noticed it from below, but there was no occasion for wonder, since the stones stood too far back from the edge to be visible to people four or five hundred feet below. He only saw in the chaotic patch a place of sanctuary, and rode right in, to draw rein with his back to one of the largest blocks of stone, while others were between him and the advancing enemy.

It was the merest chance, but a long search could not have discovered a better spot for the boy's temporary protection, and calling up the little knowledge he had picked up of the Indians' nature and habits, he set his teeth as he let the rein fall upon his mount's neck, passed the sling of his rifle over his head, and drew round and opened his cartridge-pouch.

"Stand still, old chap," he said, and for the moment he thought of dismounting, resting the barrel of his piece across the saddle, and firing from there; but the thought came that at any moment he might have to seize the opportunity to gallop off, while the minute expended in changing his position and mounting might make all the difference between escape and capture.

So he sat fast and waited, watching the approach of the Indians, who did not ride in at once, but treated him, after their experience of seeing one of their companions go down, as a dangerous enemy, one to be taken unawares, or after being rendered helpless, while for his part Chris sat firm as a rock, feeling fear, of course, but strung up by the sensation of being suddenly called upon to fight for his life.

But he felt that it would not be long before the enemy took action, while there were moments when his heart seemed to sink with the heaviness of despair, as he fully realized how little he could do against so many.

He was not kept waiting long after the Indians had closed up, for they stopped about a hundred yards away and then started off as if about to turn their horses in an elliptical course, starting off and riding round, each man as he passed the lad at a distance of some fifty yards uttering a piercing war-whoop, with the evident intention of alarming their victim, who however sat waiting patiently and apparently not alarmed in the least.

These shouts were given as the whole body passed round and within range, and lasted till every man had shouted his defiant cry, while the lad sat fast holding his fire. But at the second career something else was evidently on the way, and if possible Chris set his

teeth harder, for as one man went by at a canter he leaned over towards his left, raised the bow he held quickly with an arrow fitted on the string, and loosed it with a *twang*!

It was aimed pretty straight, and loosed off just as the man was clearing one of the blocks of stone, against whose side the arrow glanced and then whizzed by Chris's head and flew over the edge of the precipice, to disappear in the depths below.

Chris drew a deep sigh and raised his rifle, for it seemed to him that it was nearing the time when he must use it.

For the Indians were riding on in the ellipse, and another man fitted an arrow to his bowstring, and as he rode by loosed it off.

A far better shot. There was no striking against rock for it to glance off, for the next moment it struck with a heavy thud in the pommel of Chris's saddle, and quivered there till the lad snapped it off.

A loud yell rose from the cantering Indians as they saw the success of the shot, and as one of the next rode by he sent his arrow whizzing by the boy's head, making him start nervously and raise his rifle to his shoulder; but nearly a minute elapsed before he fired and lowered his piece to thrust in a fresh cartridge, sitting half-hidden by the smoke, which screened him from his enemies at the same time that it hindered him from seeing the effect of his shot.

As the smoke rose it was only to show the party cantering by at an easy pace and looking as if they were engaged in some trial of skill, and in spite of the peril in which he was placed Chris's thoughts played a strange prank, suggesting to him the old fable of the boys and the frogs.

"What is sport to you is death to us!" he muttered bitterly, and aiming more carefully now, well in advance of one of the Indians, he drew trigger and wrenched himself on one side to avoid the smoke and watch the effect.

The act worked in a two-edged way, for another arrow darted by him with a buzz like that of an angry hornet, at the same time that a yell arose, for he saw the man at whom he had fired trying to scramble up from the earth and falling again, while his horse after throwing its rider had reared up, to stand pawing the air frantically for some moments, before coming down on all fours, and then tearing off at full gallop as hard as it could set hoof to ground.

There was a furious yell of rage at this, and a feeling of satisfaction thrilled through the boy's frame as his busy fingers opened and closed the breech of his rifle. But the triumph was only short-lived.

Whizz—thud, another arrow was loosed off from the string, striking the pony low down in the chest. The poor animal uttered a groan that was almost human in its tones, as it plunged and wrenched itself round, to stand biting at the place where the arrow stuck out, snapping it in two, and nearly unseating its rider, as well as robbing him of the power to fire again, for his side was now towards the foe. Worse still, the pony's change of front presented the whole flank to the enemy, who responded with a yell of triumph by sending in a couple more arrows, both of which hit.

In an instant the poor brute was erect upon its hind-legs, overbalancing itself and falling backward, Chris saving himself by throwing himself sidewise, while as he scrambled up, holding on tightly to his rifle, he turned to fire, fully expecting that the Indians would dash in; but the muzzle of the presented rifle was too formidable for them—they knew its power, and they kept on cantering along, yelling with delight.

Meanwhile the pony was kicking wildly and tearing at the turf as it lay upon its side.

Chris did not attempt to fire, but obeyed the impulse of trying to get his mount to rise again, with the full intent of flinging himself upon its back and galloping in desperation through the enemy.

Two arrows whizzed by him, for his motion, consequent

upon the pony's struggles and his efforts to avoid the poor brute's hoofs, was so rapid that he formed a bad butt for a galloping horseman, and so escaped for the moment.

"Up—up, old chap!" he shouted, as he caught hold of the rein, and in obedience to the familiar voice the brave little beast made a desperate effort, and gained its feet, uttering an almost human shriek. Then with a bound it threw up its head, nearly snatching the rein from its master's hand, plunging and kicking wildly.

"Keep still—wo-ho!—quiet!" cried Chris; but in vain, and doubtless fortunately for himself, for he was dragged here and there by the frantic steed, quite ignorant of the direction the pony's struggles led him, but always just out of the course of arrow after arrow, some of which flew wide, while others nearly grazed him, but not one hit.

The thought that dominated all others now in Chris's mind was that he must let go. He had nearly been down twice; then he had stumbled over one of the stones which lay thickly here and there; the pony's hoof grazed his side as, mad with rage and pain, it tore away from him, giving a sudden snatch in its effort to get free from the rein Chris had twisted round his hand.

For the moment the boy felt that his shoulder was dislocated; then he knew that he had lost his foothold and was being dragged over the ground; and the very next moment, as a terrific yell smote his ears, it seemed to be cut off short and to sound distant, for he was falling through the air, to strike somewhere heavily, roll over and feel that he was gliding down amidst stones and loosened earth. Then he was checked again, hanging as it were for a moment before commencing another slide shorter than the last, for he was brought up with a sharp shock against a stone, to which he clung, just as he heard a dull crash somewhere beneath him, and the sound of hoofs tearing at stones, which kept on clattering down in an avalanche, to keep up a loud, heavy, rattling noise, but all far below.

In spite of the horrible excitement and confusion,

Chris's brain was clear enough. His left arm felt useless, and his shoulder throbbed, but he was quite conscious that his head was not injured, and perfectly well aware that he had stuck to the rein till the unfortunate pony had dragged him to the edge of the precipice at the head of the valley, and then, mad with pain, gone over, to be lying somewhere below.

But not dead yet, for every now and then the sound of the poor beast's hoofs came up, striking at loose stones and sending more and more clattering down into the valley.

And then for a few moments the boy turned sick, and loosing his hold of his gun, which lay half under him, he clung with all his might to the stone which had checked his further downward progress; for the new thought which had attacked him was that if he did not hold fast he would fall—fall—down the dizzy height into the black darkness of the end.

As he lay there clinging with all his might he was conscious of a wild gabble of voices in an unknown tongue, somewhere above him, and then as if out of a mist a stone fell, struck that to which he clung, and glanced off, to be heard no more. But another small stone came rattling down, in company with some earth, and opening his eyes he found himself staring upward at the edge of the cliff and the narrow, earthy and stony cleft down which he had fallen, recognizing it even then as the probable bed of the torrent, that had at some time or other flowed over the riven cliff to plunge into the depths below.

The loud talking right above cleared away the last of the giddy feeling of faintness, but only for him to be face to face with a fresh horror, for all at once another arrow whizzed by, but yards away, and looking up he could see the head of an Indian whose eyes glistened in the sunshine as he peered down as if to look for the effect of the arrow he had dispatched.

Then another head appeared, and the talking increased. Men were shouting, and apparently the shouts were orders,

and more heads appeared. Stones and earth crumbled down too, and another arrow whizzed by and struck somewhere near; but it did not seem to come straight down, while another sent directly after evidently came from away to his right.

"They can't reach over far enough to get a good aim at me," thought Chris then, with a strange sense of resignation to the inevitable making him feel calm and patient in his utter helplessness. He could hear the pony strike out again and the stones the poor beast dislodged go clattering down, and then there was a peculiar rushing sound, and small broken pieces and earth began to fall near him, making him strain his eyes once more to see whence they came.

He knew the next moment, for a shout reached his ears, coming from above, and the legs of an Indian passed into sight, then the whole of his body, as more stones crumbled down, and as the boy watched he made out plainly enough that one of his enemies had lowered himself down, crept sidewise, and had just reached a ledge far above him and a little on one side, where he was busy settling himself in a sitting position before drawing his bow from his back and proceeding to fit an arrow to the string.

The look of triumph in the man's painted face was clear enough in the bright morning air. His teeth glistened as he smiled, and Chris clung still not daring to move, but ready to smile as the thought occurred even then, Why shouldn't I let go and fall, so as to disappoint this malicious savage of his attempt to slay?

But it was all like a terrible waking dream to Chris, who lay there conscious of the fact that several of the man's comrades were peering over the edge of the cliff watching his efforts and now waiting to see the successful shot.

It seemed a long time after the nock of the arrow was fitted to the sinew string before, setting his feet against a stone and his back firmly against the perpendicular at the back of the shelf he had gained, the Indian fixed his eyes on his victim and deliberately drew the arrow to the head.

But the effort made in a very critical position caused one foot to slip a little, and slackening the string, the savage shifted his foot, and as soon as he had satisfied himself that he was not likely to slip and plunge headlong down into the valley, he drew the arrow to the head again.

But once more, as with starting eyes Chris watched for the loosing of the shaft, there was a check in the proceedings. For, after lying quite still for some minutes, the pony uttered a loud neigh and began to kick and paw at the stones amongst which he lay, sending a fresh avalanche down into the valley.

The Indian started like a wild beast at the sound, and his sharp eyes were turned to gaze downward as he reached out a little. But apparently satisfied that the sound was not the prelude to an attack, he once more settled himself down and—quickly now, in response to a shout from the Indians above him—drew his arrow to the head.

Chris tried to close his eyes, but his nerves and muscles were rigid as the bow twanged, and he noted that the arrow passed like a flash, high up above his head, as he saw the savage spring up standing on the ledge, clap his hand to his breast, and curving himself backward as his knees bent, fall outward and come down to strike the side of the cliff a couple of dozen yards away, level with the stone to which his intended victim clung. Then he bounded off to descend swiftly, drawing himself up like a ball, and pass out of sight, but only to fall with a sickening crash not far from where a little puff of smoke had darted out in the bottom of the valley, to be followed by a sharp crack which echoed from the cliffs and re-echoed twice, to mingle with a chorus of yells from the edge where a score of Indians stood peering over to try and see where their companion had struck.





CHAPTER XLII

HOW TO TURN ROUND

THERE was another puff of smoke, and another, followed by their cracks and echoes; a few moments' pause, and two more, with the result that every Indian on the ledge disappeared, two of them falling prone, to lie motionless, the others to hurry to where their companions held the reins that had been passed to them.

Chris saw nothing of this, but at every report coming from down in the depression his heart leaped, knowing as he did that the sharp cracks were the reports of rifles, and that these could only be fired by his friends.

From clinging there half stunned and perfectly inert, he felt a thrill of energy begin to move within him—a thrill which became a spasm as all at once he saw something moving that looked like an animal crawling over the edge of the cliff about fifty feet diagonally away from where he lay.

As the object passed from behind some intervening trees he could see plainly enough that it was an Indian grasping a bow, and the top of his quiver could be seen above his shoulder.

Chris was alert now, and grasped the fact that this was another of the enemy making his way down to a big patch of pensile growth which would afford him cover, from whence he could direct his arrows either at his

watcher or at those who had fired upward from the valley.

"Could I?" he asked himself, with the desire for life once more throbbing strongly in his veins.

He began to prove his position. He had lain clinging with all his might to that stone ever since he had fallen, in the full belief that if he slackened his hold he would glide off into the depths and fall to the bottom; but as in his calmer frame of mind he began to test this, he found that loosening his desperate grasp made no difference, that where he lay was fairly level, and that he was safe enough so long as he could retain his nerve.

His left arm ached violently, but there was nothing the matter with his right, and to his great satisfaction his rifle was beside him, with pouch, pistol, and hunting-knife.

He began to examine his rifle-lock, and found all was right there, and that by moving a little he could place the stone between himself and his enemy so that he would not only have a breastwork over which to fire, but a protection to turn aside arrows sent for his destruction.

He turned cautiously aside, for he felt that cunning eyes might be watching him; but in spite of the caution he could not evade the quick glance of the watching enemy.

Chris grasped the fact, and quick as thought, as his rifle now rested upon the top of the stone, brought the sight to bear upon the Indian.

It was to save his life, he knew, for his enemy was as quick in his movements as he, with the result that a well-aimed arrow flashed across the intervening distance like a ray of light, which was quenched in the puff of white smoke which darted from the boy's rifle. Then simultaneously with the report there was a sharp *click*, and the tough reed-like piece of wood glanced away, diverted from the object at which it was aimed, while as Chris peered with starting eyes over the top of the stone which had saved him from a grievous wound, if not from death, he saw beneath the smoke which floated upwards another of the Indians rolling over three or four times before

descending into the depths below with ever-gathering speed.

There was another chorus of yells from overhead, and though he could not see them, Chris felt assured that the enemy were raging about the top of the cliff, seeking to send arrows at him; and he had additional proof of this being a fact, for *crack!—crack!—crack!—crack!* four reports came from below, with what effect he could not tell, but it seemed certain that his friends had fired at the enemy, whose yelling ceased, a strange and terrible silence succeeding the cries.

Chris re-loaded his empty barrel and looked sharply in several directions, mostly in that from which danger had shown itself, and with the full intention of firing at the first enemy who tried to reach the spot which commanded his resting-place. But the silence continued, and there was no sign of a renewed attack.

Then all at once there was a fresh beating of the pony's hoofs from below, where everything was hidden. This was followed by a sharp scrambling sound, and again by a tremendous rush as of earth and stones sliding down for awhile before reaching the bottom with a crash.

"My poor nag!" groaned Chris, and in imagination he saw the crushed and bleeding body of the sturdy little steed lying motionless amidst the heap of stones.

The fancy was so horribly vivid that he shivered as if from a cold wind passing over him, while all the time he was bathed with perspiration.

The old dread of slipping from the narrow ledge upon which he lay came back, and with a terrible feeling of despair he waited for the moment when he would again be falling swiftly through the air to share the fate of his mount.

He had just reached this point when, sounding rather faint and distant but perfectly clear, he heard a familiar voice calling him by name.

But in his state of painful agitation he could make no reply, only lie motionless and ready to ask himself whether he had not conjured up the call himself.

But it was no fancy! It was his father's voice, sounding as if sent forth with a great effort between hands held on either side of the speaker's lips.

"Chris! Chris!" And perfectly clearly now a repetition of the words in a husky whisper from somewhere close at hand.

The Indians were above him, he knew, and it was like telling them exactly where he lay; but the boy felt that at all risks he must reply, and bending over a little so as to direct his voice downwards, he shouted—

"Ahoy! Here!"

Ahoy! Here!

The softly-whispered echo of the cry, not from close at hand, but from the face of the cliff far away.

But there was another and more ominous sound, or rather burst of sounds, at this, for a chorus of savage yells arose from the top of the cliff above him, and he knew that the Indians must have exposed themselves once more, for a couple of shots rang out from far below, raising strange echoes from the end of the valley, and once more there was the terrible silence in which Chris crouched hopelessly, for more than ever now he felt the crux in which he was placed—to attempt to move was to fall or expose himself to the arrows waiting for him on the top of the cliff.

The next minute the black cloud of hopelessness seemed to be cut by the voice which came up out of the depths—the voice that told him his friends were watching and waiting—as he felt must be the case—to fire at the first Indian who showed himself above the top of the cliff.

"Chris!" So low and distant, but so clear. "Chris!"

"Ahoy! *Coo—ee!*" shouted the boy downward, and from between his hands.

This time there was no answering yell, and Chris listened to the words that came up, sending a thrill of joy through him, but at the same time a strange tremor of fear.

"Can you hear?" came now.

"Yes."

"Then—listen," came with very slow emphasis. "You—must—creep—gully—lower—self—down."

Chris was silent as he sat staring down as it seemed into nothing but the clear air, for the stone to which he had clung projected from the cliff-face, just as the parts above him overhung as if about to fall.

"Hear?" came from below.

The single word was so sharp and imperative that the boy replied at once, shouting the one word, "Can't!" And then, as if ashamed of himself for so shrinking a reply, he alluded to one only of the dangers which hemmed him in by crying out, "Indians!"

Chris's heart leaped again, and hope grew brighter, for he more fully grasped his situation from the next words that came, though he had pretty well understood it before.

"Dare—not—show."

But the words had hardly been uttered before Chris felt that he knew more than his friends, for his strained and wandering eyes, which shrank from gazing down into the awful depths below, suddenly became aware of a slight movement amongst the pensile growth between the summit and the spot from which the Indians had shot at him.

He was in doubt for a few moments, and he held his breath as he cautiously brought his rifle to bear upon the hanging bush. But it did not stir, and it seemed evident that he had only imagined the danger.

He had held his breath painfully while he watched, and now, feeling that he was wrong, and must say something to those below, he breathed again freely and was about to speak when his heart seemed to stand still again, for one swinging bough was slightly agitated and pressed aside, showing the glistening, copper-hued skin of an Indian's shoulder, with the strap of a quiver-sling plainly in view.

The man was evidently crawling like a short thick serpent to reach a spot from which he could shoot; but it was not to be, for covering the Indian's side the boy waited a full minute to see if a better opportunity presented itself; and it came, for after lying perfectly still for awhile the man raised himself a little as if to clear something in his

way, and then gave a spasmodic jerk, rolled over sidewise, and came gliding out from beneath the hanging growth, to fall like those who had gone before.

"How horrible!" thought Chris with a shudder, as he re-charged the barrel he had just fired. Then bitterly, "More horrible for poor father if it had been Chris Lee."

The excitement of this fresh attempt to reach him roused him to try whether he could not obey the order that had been shouted from below, while the needed spur was now applied in the shape of the one word which rose up, perfectly clear—

"Try!"

The boy's answer took the form of obedience.

Glancing upward to see that he was quite hidden, and again at the ledge from which the arrows had come, Chris passed his rifle-sling over his head and one shoulder, got the piece well over his back, and flattening himself down upon his chest, edged himself along to get his head a little beyond the stone of shelter so that he could look down, when he turned icy with the shiver that ran up his spine. For he was gazing down a perpendicular portion of the cliff-face to a patch of bushes fully two hundred feet below.

"Oh, it's impossible!" he cried; but as he uttered the words once more the command came up—

"Try!"

"Ah, he doesn't know," groaned the boy despairingly, as he shrank shivering back to his old position, to lie still for a minute, feeling the palms of his hands grow wet. But the sound of that word *try* seemed to be echoing on his ear, and thrusting himself more away from the edge of the shelf over which he had peered, he wrenched his head round to see whether there was any possible ledge or slope on the other side of the stone where he had looked before and had seen as it were that it projected right out.

Once more his heart seemed to leap, for as he looked after backing a little more, he could see that his feet rested on a ledge formed by one band of the shale projecting about a foot beyond that above, while two yards or so beyond this ledge was broken sharply away.

What was beyond he could not see, but the ledge was certainly safer than the spot he occupied, there being room for him to lie down, and, better still, he could see that he would be better screened from any attack made from the ledge or the clump of bushes, the stone and an angle of the cliff being between the ledge and the dangerous foes.

It was a case of its being only the first step that costs. Chris had begun to try, and forcing himself backward along the ledge inch by inch, he soon had the satisfaction of feeling that he was more hidden from the danger of being shot at than he expected, while the cliff-wall at whose foot he lay completely screened him from above.

There was a hopefulness about this, a feeling of being rewarded for his effort to try, which nerved the boy to continue, in spite of the difficulties attending his backward progress and the way in which his rifle caught against the wall, and his having to stop again and again to readjust the holster of his revolver, which kept on slipping round.

"This going backward is horrible," he said to himself at last, as he paused rather out of breath to look anxiously about him, but felt in better heart upon again seeing how thoroughly he was screened from the Indians. The danger was not there, and he had nothing to mind on one side where the rock-wall went right up, probably to the table-land above, which, for aught he knew to the contrary, might come right to the edge of the mass of earth and stone. That which he had to fear was the horrible vacancy on his left, over which, had he cared to, he could have stretched out his hand; but though more than once tempted to do so, he shrank from it with a shudder.

"But I must do something," he thought. "I can't go on backwards like this."

He waited a little while to let his breath come and go more easily, and while he lay there resting upon his chest he thought. He reasoned with himself in a kind of argument and appeal to his common-sense.

"This natural shelf," he said, "is about a foot wide, and if it were only just above the ground I should feel not the slightest nervousness, but be ready to stand up and run

along it, instead of creeping back like a worm. Suppose it does go down hundreds of feet, what then? There is just as much room, and it only wants pluck. If I couldn't run along it I might walk steadily. I will."

But he did not begin. The horror of that great unknown depth was too hard to master; but he raised himself slowly on all fours to see if he could not turn himself round so as to crawl the rest of the way head first instead of feet.

It seemed very simple, but at the first trial his rifle caught tightly, and he was attacked by a sensation as of something thrusting at him hard, so that he closed his eyes and remained for some seconds with his head projecting over the edge of the shelf before he shuffled himself back into his former position, and then lay panting till the breathlessness that had attacked him passed away, leaving a sensation of anger against himself for his want of firmness.

"Oh, it's cowardly," he muttered fiercely. "I can't go on backwards, and I must and will do it. But how?"

He thought more calmly at last, and it seemed plain enough. All he had to do, it seemed, was to take fast hold of some projection in the rock, so as to steady himself, and then——

No, that wouldn't do.

"I see," he panted the next minute. "Turn over on my back. But is there room?"

This required a good deal of anxious thought, for failure meant plunging down at once into the depths below.

"There must be room enough," he panted, "if I keep on edging myself close to this great wall of rock."

He hesitated no longer, but setting his teeth hard and moving by inches, and battling with the hindrances offered by the weapons he carried, he wrenched himself round till he lay flat upon his back, gazing upward calmly enough in spite of one terrible half-minute he had passed, when it seemed to him that his rifle was acting as a lever to thrust him right off.

"But that was only fancy," he said to himself now the danger was past, "and all I have got to do is to take hold

tightly of the rock with my right hand and of some block or projection in this wall with my left, let my legs glide over the edge, and sit up. It only means my legs swinging over the gulf. Then I can get on to my hands and knees and go forward easily enough, while my rifle won't be in the way.

"Only means my legs swinging over the gulf," said Chris again, this time aloud, in a peevish, low voice. "Only! Oh, I can't do it," he groaned, and then breathlessly and without giving himself an opportunity to shrink, he said aloud, "I will."

The next minute he had begun making the effort—seizing the edge of the rock and reaching up overhead to feel about till his fingers sank into a crevice, and then, panting heavily, he made one brave effort, holding on tightly and letting his legs glide over, while he stiffly raised himself up, moving as it were upon a pivot, that pivot being the base of his spine.

"There," he cried triumphantly, as the result of his effort was that he was sitting upright on the ledge with his feet in the air, but not swinging, for he pressed his heels hard against the rock beneath him, as he glanced sidewise to think of how he was to make his next movement.

"Chris! Ahoy! Chris!" came faintly from below, and at the same moment there was a sharp crack, and the ledge upon which he was sitting gave way, dropping down with its burden, many feet on either side of him parting clean from the wall of rock, just as if it had been riven off by some mighty wedge.





CHAPTER XLIII

A WELCOME WORD

CHRIS'S lips parted for a cry to escape, but his teeth remained fast set, and there was not a sound for the moment. He was conscious of dropping rapidly down without the slightest change in his position, and then there was a dull heavy shock, when the apparently solid piece of ledge, after being exposed to the atmosphere for ages, crumbled into dust and went on downward with a curious whispering rush along a steep slope instead of over a perpendicular wall. Choking with the dust which arose, rolled over and over and half blinded, Chris was stunned by the confusion of the rush, for how long he could not tell, and then there was a sudden stoppage, and he lay half buried in the *débris* of the little earthen 'avalanche.

For a few moments the lad was too much stunned to attempt to move, and lay motionless, trying to pierce the thick dust which closed him in. Then the horror and dread of his position came upon him with terrible force, and he began to struggle violently, increasing the dust, but getting first one arm and then the other free. Then matters grew more easy; he dragged himself sidewise, and shovelfuls of the *débris* dropped from his hips, while he could feel that his legs were looser. Then another desperate struggle, and he was on the outside of the sloping

heap, but only to set the surface in motion again and roll and glide down and down and over and over once more, till he was brought up short in the narrowest part of a wedge-shaped mountain cleft, to begin struggling again, trampling as if rapidly ascending stairs, to avoid being buried by the gliding rubbish still in motion and filling up the bottom of the rift.

The dust was still forming a cloud, but it was floating away, leaving the bare sides of the cleft clear enough for him to see far above him where the ledge ran horizontally along the side of the huge wall; and the change in colour showed him where what seemed to be quite a small portion had dropped away.

Chris's next effort was to feel himself over and move his limbs, which felt sore, and ached; but he soon found that he was not hurt, and began to try and realize his position.

As far as he could make out he was in a rift of the valley; walls almost completely shut him in on three sides and nearly so on the fourth, but here there was light—bright light—coming through a lightning-shaped, enormous crack which zigzagged downward from a great height, and whose depth below he could not trace.

The position would have been enough to confuse a man at any time, but now after the fall it was tenfold more puzzling than it would have been to one trying to ascend the rock-face. But Chris soon came to the determination that the open valley must be out beyond the zigzag rift, and shaking himself clear of the rubbish which adhered to his garments, he felt that his weapons were all right, and then began to make his way over the fallen stones and earth to the great crack.

"I must be a long way down the cliff," thought the lad; "but it's wonderful that I'm not hurt—more," he added after a pause, for a feeling of stiffness and pain began to trouble him.

With the pain the remembrance of the Indians began to come back from where it had been driven, and instinctively drawing round his rifle, he looked upward; but the edge of the cliff was not visible from where he stood, and

there was no fierce-looking warrior upon any ledge drawing his bow to send an arrow whizzing through the air. But all the same Chris instinctively hastened his steps over the yielding *débris*, seeing as he did that once inside the zigzag rift he would be sheltered from any such danger as that.

The next minute he had left the heaped-up earth and shale, to begin climbing over blocks of hard stone which filled up the bottom of the rift, finding the way difficult, even painful, with the light a very short distance in front, but with jagged masses hanging threateningly overhead and looking as if a touch would bring them thundering down.

It was only fancy though, for they would be immovable until the water that the boy now heard trickling softly amongst the stones far beneath his feet had gone on doing its insidious mining perhaps for ages, for the zigzag rift was composed of massive stone.

"Oh, if I could only get some of that water!" thought Chris, as he now heard the soft musical trickle which roused within him a parching feeling of thirst.

But it was far out of reach save to some burrowing animal which might have felt no compunction about making its way down through the crevices of the fallen blocks over which Chris continued to stumble, till all at once he dragged himself through a narrow opening between the two sides of the rift, to find that he could look diagonally across the valley at the openings and terraces far away, but evidently those which would be the unexplored portions of the rock city, opposite the places they had examined.

"Hurrah!" he cried, as the light seemed to flash into his spirit and give him strength, for a shot rang out from somewhere to his right. He knew it must come from there, for the echo came from beyond the opening on his left.

Then there was another, and another, to awaken the echoes, followed by silence, during which he waited for a fresh signal.

It came at last, but very faint and distant, and though he shouted several times over, there was no reply.

"It's of no use to wait," muttered Chris; "they can't hear, and if they did they couldn't help me. I must help myself."

Feeling this strongly he climbed a little farther, to find that he was at the edge of the zigzag rift, which, as far as he could make out, clove the face of the cliff from a great height up to far below him; and to damp his spirits the fact was clearly before him that he could go no farther outward, for there was no fancy here—he was at the edge of a genuine precipice, and if there was any escape it must be by descending.

He stepped back a little way and reached where the stones were piled up roughly, partially filling up the rift, and by using care he was able to descend from block to block, with the water keeping up its musical tinkle far below.

"Why, it must be making its way out into the valley," he thought, "and if I can follow it I may be able to get out where it falls."

"But we saw no falls," he said, after a few minutes' thought; "but then we never came quite to this end of the place, and only saw it from a distance. Let's see; water keeps going down and down, and if I can keep on close by it it's sure to lead one right into the valley, which looked as if it was completely closed at the upper end."

"So it is," Chris added, with a pitiful little laugh. "The Indians couldn't get down—those who were shot did. And so did I; but only after two awful tumbles. Why, it must be a wonder that I am alive. But it killed my poor nag."

Chris did not talk to himself, but his brain was very active, and he wondered a good deal why it was, as he kept on threading his way over and under stones, with the water acting as guide—why it was that he heard no more calls.

"It must be," he thought, "that they are quite behind me, while I'm making my way across the end of the valley,

so that I shall come out somewhere near the opposite side—if I ever do get out, for the place gets narrower and darker the farther I go.”

Chris had good cause to complain, for from climbing over blocks of stone he had to begin creeping under and between pieces so closely set that there were times when he was ready to give up in despair, and at last the end of his journey seemed to have arrived. For he was brought up short at the mouth of a cavern-like place where the sound of trickling water grew louder and was accompanied by a peculiar whispering echo sounding horribly strange and mysterious, coming as it did out of black darkness.

It took a strong effort to enter the place, but the lad had grown desperate. He was conscious that whatever difficulty there was to encounter he must face it, so bending down and feeling his way by the rough rocky wall, he stepped on very slowly and cautiously, for the flooring of the cavern-like place was of loose stones, beneath which he could hear the water running faster as if nearing its exit, and he knew that if he could not find the opening where the spring ran into the valley, he could come back, for the hidden stream would still be his guide.

He had just comforted himself with this thought—a most welcome one where all was black—when it seemed to him that there was a dull suggestion of light not far ahead, and he took a few more cautious steps with his hands telling him startling news, for he found that the roof was rapidly getting lower, and a few yards farther he had to stoop.

But it was lighter, and hence it was that a little farther on he did not hesitate to crawl, while before he had progressed many feet farther he had to drag himself over the rough stones, which vibrated now from the water flowing about their bases, and then as he dragged himself out into the full light of day it was into the rocky channel of a stream where the water, that must at some time have rushed out as a heavy fall, smoothing the stones on either side, was now invisible, descending as it did for about fifty feet into the valley amongst the rocks, and plunging,

mole-like, deep down beneath the surface, as if shunning the light of day.

“Hah!” sighed the lad, as he stood upright and breathed deeply of the soft pure air, for his difficulties seemed to be at an end, nothing remaining for him to do but lower himself down amongst the rocks from the rough ledge upon which he was perched, when his heart leaped at the sound of a familiar voice hailing him with a cheery “Ahoy!”





CHAPTER XLIV

OPEN-AIR SURGERY

“**G**RIGGS!” shouted Chris excitedly.

“Why, there you are! The doctor’s gone the other way to see if he could find a gully by which he could climb up to try and find you. I came this way. Same purpose, and I’ve got all the luck. Take care! Mind! These stones are slippery.”

“Yes, I’ll mind,” said Chris, as he descended the rocks backwards. “This is nothing; but hadn’t you better run and tell father you’ve found me?”

“Nay! I’m not going to brag. I didn’t find you; you seem to have found me. Then you haven’t broken your neck?”

“No.”

“How many legs are snapped?”

“None,” said Chris, who threatened to break one directly, so reckless was his progress.

“Arms, then?”

“I’m all right, I tell you, only a bit knocked about; but where’s Ned?”

“Along with his father on the upper terrace, giving the Indians a bit of a shot now and then to keep them from coming up after the mules.”

“But can they do it alone?”

“Oh yes; the brutes are sad cowards and don’t like powder and shot at all.”

"There!" cried Chris, leaping to earth and coming close to the American. "Now then, I want to join father."

"That's soon done," said Griggs; "but keep an eye up towards the top yonder, and 'ware arrows."

"Yes, I know," said Chris excitedly.

"Of course you do; but they'll be pretty shy of showing themselves now, after our bit of shooting."

"Walk quicker," said Chris. "But tell me, how did the enemy attack you?"

"That's what we want you to tell us, lad. When they began we were afraid they had got you. How did it all happen?"

Chris explained in a few words, and then began questioning, to learn how those he had left behind were nearly taken by surprise, but their preparations proved too perfect and a few shots had driven the Indians back.

"Spoiled our night's rest, though," said Griggs dryly, "for there was no sleep for fear of the redskins stealing by us in the dark and driving off the cattle."

"Ah," said Chris, with a sigh. "My poor mustang!"

"Poor brute, yes," said Griggs. "It was a thousand pities. I liked that pony. He made me jealous of you."

"Don't talk about him," said Chris quickly. "I tried so hard to save him."

"You did, my lad; you did."

"How do you know?" said Chris, staring.

"How do I know? Why, didn't I tell you the redskins spoiled our night's rest?"

"Yes."

"Well, that means we were all wide awake at day-break."

"Then you saw all?" cried Chris.

"Why, certainly. Ned had the glass and was telescoping in all directions up and down the valley, looking out for squalls, when he suddenly made us all jump nearly out of our skins for joy by shouting out, 'There's Chris!'"

"And then you saw all that happened?"

"To be sure we did," said Griggs; "everything, and precious unpleasant some of it was. It brought us into

action pretty soon though, making us hurry up towards the head of the valley here on the chance of getting a good shot or two in amongst our savage friends."

Chris turned round and looked the American full in the face, but without speaking.

"Well, what's the matter, lad? Smudgy with gunpowder? Oh, I've had no time to wash this morning."

"Griggs," cried Chris excitedly, "who was it fired that shot?"

"Which one, my lad? We sent a good many flying."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, who was firing. Your father, of course."

"You're prevaricating, Griggs," cried Chris huskily. "Tell me at once who fired that shot?"

"Which one? We tumbled two or three, or more, of the enemy down. So did you. I heard your rifle crack, and saw them come off the cliff."

"No nonsense, Griggs; you know what I mean. I say, who fired that shot?"

"And I say which one? There were so many."

"The one that saved my life."

"Oh, I see," cried the American; "that one. Well, I think it was either me or the doctor, but we were in such a state of excitement that it's doubtful."

"There, I was sure of it from the first," cried Chris, holding out his hand; "it was you, Griggs."

"I don't say it was, and I don't say it wasn't, my lad," said the American, turning away carelessly as if not seeing the extended hand; "but look here, it was bad enough for you, that set-to with the redskins; but it was all excitement and action; you had no time to think. It was a hundred times worse for us down below here."

"Indeed?" said Chris half mockingly.

"Yes, indeed. I tell you, my lad, I never passed such a bad half-hour before in my life. We could see every movement, except when you galloped out of sight. It all stood out like a picture against the clear morning sky, while there we were nearly all the time, afraid to shoot because we were more likely to hit you than the enemy..

My word, I felt bad enough, but it was just horrible for the doctor."

"Poor father!" said Chris.

"You may well say that, my lad. P'raps you don't know it, but he thinks a deal of you, my lad."

"Why, of course," cried Chris.

"Very foolish of him, I suppose, but then he don't know you so well as I do. He's prejudiced, you see."

"I suppose so," said Chris.

"My word, he did take on when he saw the mustang come over the cliff and drag you after it!"

"Don't talk about it," cried Chris with a shudder.

"Why not? I think it was very fine now. We were a bit worried at first, and the doctor couldn't shoot at all for some time; but as soon as we heard you begin to pop and the redskins came down, we nearly went mad with joy. I saw, though he didn't say much out loud, but I just caught sight of his lips moving now and then; and the way he shot afterwards—I don't believe he made a miss. I say, the redskins were soon tired of showing their faces over the edge of the cliff. But, my word, Chris, lad, you had a narrow escape!"

"Several," said Chris, smiling.

"Ah! Yes! You ought to have been killed with the arrows."

"Ought I?"

"Yes, that you ought. Those fellows shoot very straight, and send those thin splints of wood with tremendous force."

"They do," sighed Chris. "My poor mustang!"

"Ah! Poor plucky little thing; he nearly killed you too."

"In his agony, poor creature. He was shot savagely."

"Ah! Yes. Seems rather hard on him—a horse to be shot by means of a horse."

"I don't understand you," said Chris, staring.

"No? Don't you know what some of their bows are?"

"Oh, you mean the strings. Made out of twisted gut, perhaps."

"That's quite right, my lad, but not what I meant. I meant the bows themselves."

"Some very tough wood, I suppose, like the yew with which the English used to make bows."

"Nay. Lots of them are made of horses' or buffaloes' ribs. They're handy and short and tough. You know with what a whing they can send an arrow."

"I didn't know that," said Chris thoughtfully.

"Didn't you, now?" said Griggs mockingly. "I shouldn't wonder if there are two or three more things that you haven't found out yet. But, as I was saying, you ought to have been a dead one over that job, squire. The redskins meant you; but they got the worst of it. I say, though, I could teach you a-many things."

"Well, you have taught me many things in shooting and fishing and hunting."

"Well, yes, a few," said the American coolly; "but they're just about nothing to what you could teach me."

"I?" cried Chris, staring at him in wonder. "Why, what could I teach you that you don't know?"

"How to tumble over a cliff like that without doing yourself any worse damage than making a few scratches, tearing your jacket, and getting yourself full of dust."

They had been tramping together across the head of the valley as they talked about their experiences, with Chris keeping a keen look-out ahead for the first glimpse of his father, and giving an occasional look up towards the edge of the cliff, which he noted was wonderfully broken up into hollows and prominences, rifts and gorges that had been invisible from a distance, and all overhung by a level band of apparently impassable rock. But during the last few minutes of their chat they had been so deeply interested that neither had glanced upward to their right, and the first warning they had of danger was given in a quick sharp shout in the doctor's familiar voice.

"Ah, look out!" he cried, and followed up his words by firing; but before the bullet left his rifle Chris heard a loud whirring and saw his companion start violently before

stooping down a few yards away to pick a little arrow from where it had stuck in the ground.

"That's not bad shooting," said Griggs coolly. "Hit him, doctor?"

"Yes," said the latter, hurrying up to catch Chris's hand.

"My boy! my boy!" he cried in a choking voice which prevented him from saying more.

But he seemed to give himself a wrench directly after, to speak out plainly and with decision.

"You must keep a sharper look-out, Griggs," he cried. "You forget that we are within range of their arrows."

"I shall remember in future, doctor," said the American dryly.

"Did that arrow touch you?" said the doctor anxiously.

"Went right through the leg of my boot, sir," said Griggs coolly.

"But it did not graze you? Why, man, you're bleeding fast!"

"Oh, it's nothing, sir," said the man.

"How do you know?" cried the doctor. "Here, let's get behind that stone. They can't touch us there."

Griggs walked firmly enough half the distance to the shelter sought for, but he limped the rest of the way, and was ready enough to sit down behind the rock and let the doctor go on one knee to carefully draw up the blood-stained bottom of the man's trousers just above where it was thrust into the high boot.

"Hah!" sighed the doctor. "Only a clean little cut in the flesh. I'll put a stitch or two in it. Why, it's as clean as if done with a knife."

The doctor had laid his rifle ready to hand, and was busy at once opening a pocket-book containing the necessities he required; but first of all he pulled round the bottle slung over his shoulder and carefully washed the diagonal cut.

"You don't think there's poison in it, do you, doctor?" said the American, with a look of amusement.

"Any form of dirt is poison to a wound," said the doctor,

drying the place ; and then, after deftly drawing the edges of the wound together, cutting some strips of plaister with the bright scissors ready, and applying them to keep all protected from the air.

"Hurt much ?" he said, as he worked away, Chris watching the while as if taking a lesson.

"Well, yes, I won't say it don't, doctor ; but not worse than I feel somewhere else. I say, though, hadn't we better make haste back to the fort ?"

"Yes ; you feel faint, don't you ?"

"Horribly," said Griggs, giving Chris a comical look.

"Let's go, then. Put your foot as lightly as you can to the ground, and lean on me. We must get out of bow-shot as quickly as we can."

"Tchah ! Only my nonsense, doctor," said Griggs cheerily. "My faintness is the same as squire's here. We want our breakfast horribly."

"Oh," cried the doctor, smiling. "I was afraid it was from your wound. I don't wonder that you are faint, Chris. But one moment, boy, do you think the Indians can lower themselves down over the edge of the cliff ?"

"No, father ; not unless they are ready to drop as I did."

"How far ?"

"Can't tell," said Chris, with an involuntary shudder. "It was rather horrible, and I wonder I wasn't killed."

"And I wonder too," said the doctor solemnly. "I don't think that they will dare to descend in the daytime, for they will be afraid that we are waiting to fire at all who show ; so come on. Are you sure you can walk, Griggs ?"

"Walk, sir ? I should like to run."

"But your leg must smart."

"Hardly smarts, sir ; it's just as if somebody was playing at sewing it up with a red-hot skewer. Nice bold refreshing sort of pain.—Tchah ! That's all right."

"But where are the mules and ponies, father ?" said Chris, as they hurried now in the direction of the terraced cliff on their right.

"Hobbled, and grazing at the foot of our cliff under shelter of a couple of rifles."

"But there are more Indians at the mouth of the gulch?"

"I don't know," said the doctor. "They had a fire burning there last night."

"Yes," said Chris dryly, "I know;" but he did not then attempt to explain how he knew.

"They haven't shown since they felt the effect of our bullets, but they're as cunning as they are treacherous, and one never knows what they may be about."

Some quarter of an hour later the adventurers were all in shelter, one of the cells of the lower range having been turned into a temporary mess-room, while the next showed signs of cooking in the shape of a curling little column of smoke; there was water in buckets outside on the terrace, where, behind a kind of breastwork hastily piled up, watch was being kept; and well in sight there were the animals of the little train, grazing contentedly enough well within range of the watchers' rifles.

Chris felt like a hero after the warmth of his welcome was beginning to cool down. He had eaten almost ravenously, and assuaged the great thirst from which he had suffered. But now the great desire from which he suffered was want of sleep, for he was utterly weary and so stiff that he could hardly refrain from uttering a groan.

All the same he had been obliged to relate his adventures once more—such of them as had not been seen from the valley. But at last he was lying down in the cool shade in one of the cells and dropping off, but only to be aroused by the coming in of Ned, who was eager to hear more.

"You are a lucky one, Chris," he said, in an ill-used tone.

"What!" cried the boy angrily; but the next moment the remark presented such a ludicrous side that he began to laugh, and then, possibly from exhaustion and the result of the exciting passages he had gone through, his mirth grew at once almost hysterical, so that he could not check himself.

"Why, what's the matter?" cried Ned wonderingly. "Have I said anything comic?"

"Horribly," panted Chris; "but I do wish you'd go, and let me sleep."

"I will soon," said Ned; "but I don't see what there is to laugh at, unless you feel jolly triumphant at getting all the best of the expedition to yourself."

"I do," said Chris. "It was lovely being shot at with arrows and tumbling down those precipices, better than any dream I ever had."

The boy's face looked mirthful, and Ned did not notice the bitterly sarcastic ring there was in his comrade's words, as he said in an envious tone—

"Well, it's all very fine, but I shall tell father that it isn't fair for you to be made the favourite, and I don't think you've behaved well."

"Don't you?" said Chris, sobering down. "I'm very sorry; but I've done the best I could."

"Perhaps so, but I don't think that if I had lost my pony I could have lain there and grinned as you've done. Poor brute! I almost believe I would rather have died myself."

Chris was perfectly sobered now, and as Ned walked away he lay there in the cool shadow with a peculiar look in his weary eyes, while, far from desiring sleep, he could only lie hot-headed and in feverish pain, thinking of the gallant way in which the pony had galloped to save his life.

It was long before he slept, and when he did it was to go through most of the events of the past night and morning again in feverish dreams. But at last he slept too heavily for dreams. Nature required rest, and the boy lay breathing in the cool mountain air and sleeping as if he meant to crowd the rest of two nights into one.





CHAPTER XLV

A WELCOME STRANGER

CHRIS!"

"Don't!"

"Chris!" in a louder tone.

"Get out!" very irritably, and the speaker turned sharply over with his face to the stones and his back to the bright sunshine that came through the old window-opening.

"Are you going to sleep here for ever?"

A grunt, accompanied by the kicking out of one leg, which would have taken effect if Ned had not hopped over it.

"I say, are you going to sleep for a week?"

"No! And I'm not asleep now," said Chris, with his eyelids squeezed very close together; "but I tell you what, if you don't be off and leave me alone I'll get up and punch your stupid old head."

"You daren't.—I should like to see you!"

"You soon will, and so I tell you. Be off, or I'll empty the wash-hand jug over you."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Ned. "Where is it?"

"Oh, bother! Be off!"

"Shan't! Do you know it's to-morrow morning?"

"No, I don't, Paddy Bull. How can it be to-morrow when it's to-day?"

There was a grunt very much like a snore.

"Well, of all the old dormice!" muttered Ned. "Chris, you must get up."

"Shan't!"

"But you've been asleep twenty-four hours."

"Look here, stupid," grumbled Chris, without stirring, "if you want to tell a big fib you should always make it as big as you can, or else people won't believe you. Say twenty-four days."

"Why, you unbelieving old humbug! It's the truth. You ate till I was ashamed of you, and then you lay down to sleep about this time yesterday, and here you are now as sleepy as ever. If you don't get up I'll go and tell the doctor you must be ill."

Chris started up into a sitting posture and uttered a cry.

"Oh! I say!—Ugh! I am stiff. I can't hardly move.—What's the matter with me?"

"Slept till you've turned stiff as a log," cried Ned. "Twenty-four hours right off."

"I say, that isn't true, is it?"

"Why, of course it is. Don't you remember lying down?"

"Of course I do. But what time is it?"

"Oh, I don't know about the time, but it's getting on for midday."

"Ned! I say, why didn't you wake me up before?"

"To be kicked at and threatened and called names?"

"Oh dear, how stiff I am! But really, Ned—no gammon—have I slept like that?"

"Of course you have. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I think so. Yes, of course. But what about the Indians?"

"Oh, they're hanging about. Some are at the mouth of the gulch, and some are on the cliffs at the top of the valley, but they don't come near."

"Haven't got the horses and mules, have they?"

"No. We've kept too sharp a look-out for them."

"Oh!" cried Chris wildly, and his face contracted with pain.

"Well, I suppose it hurts," said Ned, with a trace of sympathy in his voice, "but I wouldn't holloa like that. Get up and move about, the stiffness will soon go off."

"I wasn't shouting because of my hurts," said Chris bitterly. "I was thinking of my poor mustang."

"Yes," said Ned, after a pause; "that was a horribly bad job; but I've been thinking about it all, old chap, and I've settled what we'll do. I'm going to play fair—same as you would if it had been my nag. We'll share one between us. I'll have him one day, and you shall have him the next."

"That wouldn't be fair," said Chris, who was rubbing himself and kneading his joints where they ached.

"Yes, it would. You wait and hear. Then we'll have that mule that we took to fetch the water—old Brown Ginger. He's a regular brick, and likes us. Don't kick so much as the others—and take it in turns to ride him. What do you say now?"

"Well—yes! I like that idea; but you wouldn't care for that."

"Look here, you're growing a sore-boned, old disagreeable. Say I'm a selfish beast at once."

"Shan't!"

"Then it's all right," cried Ned.

"It's very good of you, old fellow."

"Bah! Rubbish! Stuff! I say, are you so very sore?"

"I can't hardly move some ways."

"Like me to give you a rub?"

"Oh no," said Chris, increasing the friction he was applying across the small of his back. "I shall be better soon. Only it's just as if I'd been hammered all over. But how queer that I should sleep like that!"

"Not a bit of it. The doctor said it was all right and it would do you good."

"Where is he?" cried Chris.

"Along with Wilton, watching the Indians down at the gulch. Father's up yonder along with old Griggs, keeping an eye on the top of the cliff, and shooting the birds that

rise out of the hollows and rifts there. They come down our part to get at the water."

"Then you've been all alone?"

"Yes, playing pony and mule-herd. Nobody at home but me in this big three-storey house."

"But what about breakfast?" said Chris anxiously.

"Over hours and hours ago. Hungry?"

"I think so: I feel very hungry."

"That's a good sign," cried Ned, grinning. "Now I'll confess. That's why I roused you up. There's coffee hot, and damper, and a split-up and frizzled bird. I don't know what it is. Sort of vulture crow, perhaps."

"What! A carrion bird?" cried Chris. "Disgusting! They're not good to eat."

"Oh, these are—delicious. I ate half of one this morning. Perhaps they're not carrion birds, though."

"It's all your gammon," cried Chris. "Who shot them?"

"Old Griggs, when they came after the water."

"That proves it. Old Griggs knows what's good to eat well enough.—Hah, that's better. I'm not quite so stiff now. But is there plenty of water?"

"Lots. Why?"

"I want to have a wash."

"Bucket and pan waiting for your lordship in the bathroom. There, go and have it; and look sharp. You'll find me in the kitchen. We're using that till the workmen have been to put the breakfast-room in a state of repair."

"You seem pretty lively this morning," said Chris, rather sourly, for he was in a good deal of pain.

"Of course I am. We're enjoying ourselves so."

"You did nothing but grumble yesterday, and said I was having all the fun."

"Ah, but I didn't know how sore you were going to be then," cried Ned merrily. "There, look sharp. Breakfast's waiting.—I say."

"What?"

"I wouldn't stop to shave this morning as it's so late."

Chris passed his hand over his chin.

"I expect it wants a scrape," he said, "to take all the dust off."

A few minutes later, feeling much refreshed, Chris was feasting away at a most enjoyable breakfast, the lads chatting away merrily the while.

"I say," said Ned, "this wouldn't be a bad place if it wasn't for the Indians. Quite a palace when it's put in repair. Land one's own; the soil beautifully rich. I believe anything would grow here. I vote we settle down."

"And what about the gold?"

"Ah, the gold! I'm beginning to think with my father that we shall never find the old temple, and that if we did we should be none the better for it. I don't think we want all that gold."

"Grapes sour?" said Chris dryly.

"N—no," replied Ned. "But there, what's the good of talking? We've come to find the gold, and we shall go on till we feel it's no good. I like what we're doing, though. We must stop here, of course, till the Indians are tired and have gone. I wish they would go."

"Yes, it makes it so horrible."

"Ah! Doesn't it? I don't mind shooting something that we want to eat. But firing at them—Ugh!"

"Yes, it is horrid," said Chris; "but they're hardly men. Savage wretches! They seem to love killing."

"Have some more vulture," said Ned quietly. "There's all that piece of breast yet."

"Vulture!" said Chris, laughing.

"Well, didn't it taste bitter?"

"Yes, a little. It's one of those prairie hen things, of course."

"No, it was a fine fat cock."

"Well, they call them prairie hens. It was, as you say, delicious."

"Well, finish it."

Chris shook his head, rose stiffly, and helped his companion to clear away.

"Now then," he said, "I'm not much disposed to walk to-day. It's just as if I'd strained one of the muscles or something up in my hip. I should like to go and sit out on the terrace. Haven't got the glass, have you?"

"Yes, it's there, in the look-out. You can't do better than take my place. There's a rifle too, and cartridges, in case the Indians show, and the stones are built up with loop-holes so that you'll be safe from arrows if the brutes do come crawling up and chasing the scouting-party."

"What are you going to do?"

"Help you do nothing," said Ned, laughing.

He led the way, and Chris limped after him, to find one part of the terrace turned into a rough observatory with a stone seat, and the binocular and rifle lying ready as Ned had said.

"I can't see anything of our people, nor yet of the Indians," said Chris, after a good look round in different directions.

"Oh, no; they keep well hidden."

"No fear of their hiding in any of those cells or on the terraces across the valley, is there?"

"I dunno; they might," replied Ned; "but they couldn't send an arrow in here from that distance."

"But we could send bullets. That side's within range," said Chris thoughtfully.

"Oh yes, and it wouldn't be lucky for one of the scalpers to show himself, I can tell him; but I say, look at the animals. I went down to them this morning, and their coats are getting smooth already. The coarse rich grass here suits them splendidly. If we stop here long they'll be growing fat."

Chris turned the glass upon the little drove of mules, which were grazing contentedly enough, and then changed his position to look at the ponies, which were keeping themselves aloof from their distant relatives, and cropping away with the thick grass right up to their knees.

"One—two—three—four—five—six," said Chris, by habit, counting the mustangs slowly.

"Hallo!" cried Ned. "Hurt one of your eyes?"

"Yes. It was when I came down with that ledge; I got both eyes full of dust and grit. Why?"

"Because you must be squinting," said Ned.

"Is this another joke?" said Chris, with the glass to his eyes.

"It's no joke," replied Ned, "not to be able to count properly. Try again."

"One—two—three—four—five—six," said Chris, counting slowly.

"Nonsense! Only five. One of your eyes don't go at all, seemingly."

"I can see them distinctly through the glass," cried Chris, with a touch of irritability in his tones.—"Why, Ned!"

"What's the matter?"

"There are six."

"Stuff!"

"There are, I tell you. Why, hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! My pony's there."

"What! You mean his ghost."

"Ghosts can't eat grass," shouted Chris wildly.

"Why not? Horses' ghosts would when they couldn't get corn."

"It is! It is!" cried Chris, with a sound like a sob in his throat, and certainly there were tears in his eyes as he handed the glass to his comrade. "Look! Look for yourself; it's my dear old mustang. Ah! there! he's walking lame. And I thought he was dead—I thought he was dead!"

"It is, old chap," cried Ned, after a hurried glance. "He must have got here somehow and joined his mates in the night. I never noticed it, and no one else did, of course."

"Oh, Ned, this is good luck!"

"Good? It's glorious! Luck squared or cubed, or somethinged, up to the tenth power. Here, let's go down and see. Can you walk?"

"Walk?" cried Chris excitedly. "I feel as if I could run!"

"Get your rifle then; we mustn't stir without our pop-guns now. Why, I say, I never thought your mount was pure bred. His great-grandfather must have been a wild-cat, a big one of the nine-lives breed, or he never could have come over that cliff, as you say, and lived. Perhaps it is his ghost, after all."

"Come on, and don't talk," cried Chris, who had buckled on his belt and slung his rifle.

"It's enough to make any one talk," cried Ned. "But, I say, you said that the Indians shot at him till he was as full of arrows as a pincushion is full of pins."

"I didn't. I said he was wounded two or three times."

"All the same. He must be a wonderful beast. Just wait till I've had a look at him, and then I tell you what we'll do. We'll change."

"Will we?" cried Chris, through his set teeth. "Poor old fellow, I wouldn't part with him for the world. *Hff!*"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm only stiff and bruised all over. Come on."

Chris limped a great deal, and suffered plenty of pain, but he got down the slope bravely, managing to step from stone to stone until the way down to the water was passed and the two lads were hurrying across the verdant portion of the valley towards where the animals were browsing and grazing.

The mules just turned their heads to look at them in a surly, uncompromising fashion, and went on feeding again, but as soon as they were passed and the lads approached the ponies, Chris raised his voice, uttering a kind of bird-call, when the effect upon the little herd was immediate: all turned their heads, and Chris's mount uttered a shrill whinnying sound, before advancing to meet him, going, however, very stiffly on three legs, and as they approached looking as if it had suffered badly enough for anything that claimed to be alive.

"My word, he has had it warmly," cried Ned. "Poor old chap, he's been in the wars, and no mistake!"

The animal limped badly, and so did Chris, as they came

within touch, when the pony thrust forward its muzzle in response to its master's extended hand, and then dropped its head and looked dejected in the extreme, but blinked and whinnied again as it felt itself caressed.

"My old beauty! My brave old chap!" cried Chris huskily. "Oh, look here, Ned! A broken arrow sticking in him still."

"Why, there's another on this side," cried Ned, "and a cut or a scratch—no, it's too bad for a scratch—there in his flank."

"He's cut here too, in the forehead. Oh, Ned, however did he manage to struggle back?"

"Oh, never mind about that. Let's have the heads of these arrows out first thing."

"Yes; they must be ready to fester in the wounds. No, we mustn't do it; they want cutting out with a proper knife. Look here, Ned; jump on your pony and go and find father. He'd like to dress the wounds himself."

"No need," said Ned sharply, as a distant whistle rang out; "here they come."

The whistle was answered, and a few minutes later the doctor and Wilton came into sight, saw the lads, and joined them.

"What's the matter?" cried the doctor hurriedly. "Another pony hurt?—What!—Impossible!—Oh, the poor beast! The brave fellow! I can hardly believe it. Here, let's lead him gently across, and I'll see what I can do. Has he just crawled back?"

"No, father; he must have come in the night," cried Chris. "We only just found that he was here."

"We didn't look at them before we went off this morning," said Wilton.

"No, and I remember I reproached myself once for not doing so. But there, we're giving all our sympathy to the pony. How are you, Chris, my boy?"

"All right now, father," was the reply. "Seeing this poor fellow has made me forget my bruises."

"But you are the better for your long sleep?"

"Yes, father; only a bit ashamed."

"Never mind that.—Tut, tut, tut!" continued the doctor. "Lame in the off fore-foot. Some horrible wrench; cut in the flank. Why, he has three arrows in him," continued the doctor, as he examined the poor beast while it limped along patiently by their side.

"But he'll get better, father?" cried Chris excitedly.

"I hope so, my boy; but I am not a veterinary surgeon. Depend upon it, though, that I shall do my best."

The pony followed them like a dog, holding out its muzzle to Chris from time to time, and uttering as soon as he was caressed a piteous sigh. But he did not wince till they were close up to the slope, where the doctor asked for bucket, water, and sponge, and began his attentions, with Chris's help, to the suffering, badly-injured beast.





CHAPTER XLVI

A PATIENT PATIENT

“**I** WONDER you are both alive,” said the doctor gravely, as he began to make a careful examination of the mustang. “The height of those cliffs is far greater than I expected.”

Chris’s eyes danced with glee, for he was beginning more and more to forget his injuries in his delight at recovering his pony.

“But we only fell a bit at a time, father,” he said merrily.

“I suppose not,” said the doctor dryly. “But now, can you help me a little, or are you too full of aches and pains?”

“You mean with the pony, father? Oh yes, I’m going to help. He’ll be so much quieter if I stand with him.”

“That’s what I thought, for I don’t want to have to throw the poor beast; he must be sore enough as it is. Stand forward, and be on your guard.”

“Yes,” said Chris quietly, “but I never thought of it before: his saddle and bridle are both gone.”

“I wonder his skin hasn’t gone too,” said Wilton. “But you had better get a good strong bridle on him again, doctor.”

“We’ll see. He’ll soon show whether he will bear what I do, or show fight. Be on your guard, Chris, for bites and kicks.”

"He won't bite or kick me, father," cried the boy resentfully.

"Not now, my boy, but I'm thinking about when I'm taking out those arrows. I must cut.—Let's see."

The doctor patted the poor animal on the neck, talking to him caressingly, and then passed his hand along slowly till his fingers pressed the spot where about an inch of one of the broken arrows stood out of the shoulder.

At the first touch the pony winced, giving a sharp twitch, making the skin crinkle up together; and he raised one hoof and stamped it impatiently, but he showed no disposition to bite.

"I believe he'll stand it," said the doctor, examining the wound. "It's beginning to fester already, and I dare say the cutting will give as much relief as pain."

"It's risky to chance it, doctor," said Wilton.

"No, I think not," was the reply. "I don't give animals the credit for much sense, but the poor beast knows us, and he may have enough to be aware that we are trying to do him good."

As the doctor spoke he opened his leather case of instruments, and took out a curved, hook-like knife and a pair of strong forceps.

"Water and sponge all ready? That's right. Now then, we shall soon know. Stand in front of his head, Chris."

Then as soon as the boy was where he was directed to stand, stroking the poor beast's nose, the doctor took hold of the broken shaft with the forceps, made sure of the position of the flattened arrowhead, and then passing the curved knife down by its side, made one firm cut through the skin and muscle, and the next moment the withdrawn arrow was thrown on the stones at their feet.

"Brave boy!" said the doctor loudly. "Why, he hardly winced. Now for the sponge and water. That's right," and he bathed and pressed the bleeding wound thoroughly. "There," he said; "I believe the poor brute really does understand. Let that bleed a little; it will help it to heal better. Now for the next."

This was a very different injury, for plainly enough to be seen just beneath the skin there lay fully six inches of a broken arrow.

The doctor passed his hand over this, and the pony shivered a little; but it was only a very superficial flinch, and the doctor changed his knife for another lying in the leather case.

"Poor old fellow," he said. "I believe I could do anything to him. He must understand."

The two boys watched everything intently, and noted that the operator pinched up the skin and arrow together; then starting from the orifice where the missile had entered he drew the keen point along the shaft till it grated on the barbed head, dividing the skin cleanly the whole length of the arrow, which required no forceps to remove it, for it dropped down of its own weight.

"Why, Chris," cried the doctor, "you couldn't have borne this so patiently.—Now, hold up the bucket, Ned. That's the way. I dare say the sponging feels comforting and takes off the itching."

"But ought it to bleed, father?" asked Chris.

"No, no. The injury is only to the skin. There's very little harm done."

The third wound was far worse, and to get out the arrowhead the doctor had to cut deeply, with the result that the equine patient stamped angrily and whinnied and shook his head. But he stood firm, making no attempt to kick or bite, and as soon as the wound was being bathed, stood blinking and evidently enjoying having its muzzle smoothed.

Then came the long cut or tear on the poor brute's flank, an injury so tender that he winced and shivered at the slightest touch. But there was no cutting here, nothing but bathing and cleansing the place thoroughly, before the skin was drawn together by means of pins passed through the edges and waxed silk wound round and round from head to point of the little pins.

The skin of the other injuries was closed in the same

way, and then the doctor made a fresh examination of the poor animal's sprain.

"I can do nothing here," he said. "Nature will put that right. There, Chris, lead him back to the others, and let him graze and forget his troubles if he can."

No leading was required, the pony following his master like a dog back to the pasture, where he began grazing for a few moments, before turning up his head to whinny loudly, and then lie down in the thick grass, stretching out legs and head, extended upon the flank.

"Why, Chris," cried Ned, "he's fainting!"

"Or something worse," cried Chris anxiously, as he sank stiffly upon his knees behind the mustang's head and laid his hand upon the neck.

"No, he's all right," cried Ned eagerly, for the pony on feeling the touch of his master's hand and hearing his voice, raised his muzzle, looked at him, and let it sink down again.

"Poor old fellow," said Chris softly, and he stayed there kneeling and talking quietly to the injured animal, till a shout from the terrace recalled them back.

Chris gave the soft neck another pat or two, and limped off with his companion.

"I do hope he's not going to die, Ned," he said, and he looked back when they had passed the mules, to have the satisfaction of seeing the pony make an effort to rise, without avail, but on the second trial he stood up with his legs far apart, gave himself a shake, and then lowered his head to begin biting feebly at the grass.

"Think he'll get over it, father?" said Chris, as he reached their stronghold.

"Oh yes. The injuries are not deep; but I'm rather afraid of that strain. He may go lame; but we shall see. I called you because I want you to keep out of the sun. Lie down in the shade and rest."

"I don't feel anything much the matter now, father."

"Perhaps not, my boy," said the doctor quietly, "but I want you to be better still to-morrow, not worse."

Chris, though he did not feel much the matter, to quote his own words, was fully conscious of being a good deal shaken, and when he lay down upon the rough bed of sagebrush covered with a blanket, the attitude was very pleasant to his aching limbs, and he soon began to feel that it was very restful to lie there watching the sides of the valley and making believe to keep a look-out for Indians.

The evening closed in, however, without any sign of the enemy, and soon after the lad had to listen to the congratulations of Bourne and Griggs, who brought in a pleasant addition to the stores in the shape of the grouse-like birds which came down from the tableland in coveys to get at the water which had been Chris's guide to the bottom of the valley.

"A fine bit of luck that, squire," said Griggs, "getting the mustang back. I was surprised."

"Have you been to see him?" asked Chris anxiously.

"Oh yes; I went as soon as I heard."

"What do you think of him?"

"Regular cripple," said Griggs, in his uncompromising way.

"But you think he'll get better?"

"Well, I hope so, but horses are ticklish things, and you never know what comes of a sprain or strain. I hope he'll come round, but I have my doubts about his being quite sound again."

As soon as it was dark the ponies and mules were quietly driven higher up the valley, so as to try and guard against any attempt to carry them off in the night. Then watch was set, and before those not on duty sought their resting-places a little debate was held as to the next steps to be taken. But not much was said. Reference was however made to Chris's mount and the possibility of his being fit to ride again at the end of a few days.

"But, you see, everything depends on the Indians," said the doctor. "We can't leave here to have them hanging on our heels, ready to catch us at a disadvantage. I almost wish they'd attack us to-morrow or next day, to

get severely punished and so discouraged that they'd be off and leave us alone."

"Don't you think they'd come back to revenge themselves?" said Chris. "They must feel very spiteful even now, father."

"Yes, but an Indian is very fond of his life, my boy, and only likes to attack when he feels pretty sure of securing plunder. Now he is not likely to get much here, for any attempt made upon our cattle is bound to result in failure."

"But suppose they attacked in the night?" said Chris.

"I don't think these people would do that, my boy. They are horse Indians—Apaches, I fancy, and they like to fight as mounted men, so that they can dash in or gallop away. But come, you've talked too much already. Lie down and go to sleep. We're pretty safe here in our stronghold; water is plentiful; and it seems as if we have only to go and lie up near that spring to get as many birds as we want. Now then, sleep. I want rest badly, for I've had a long day and quite as much anxiety as is good for any one man."

Chris thought the same as he lay there, rather sleepless now, after so long an indulgence; and he thought a good deal too as he gazed up through the window opening at the great stars, a little feverish and worried about his part in the adventures.

"Could I have done any better than I did?" kept coming as a question which remained unanswered when he dropped off to sleep, to begin dreaming about the reproachful eyes of his pony for a time. Then all was blank.





CHAPTER XLVII

COUNCILS OF WAR



CHRIS awoke next morning to find his father standing over him.

"Well, my boy; better?"

Chris started up, uttered a squeak and screwed up his face with a laugh, and fell back.

"How's my pony, father?"

"What was the matter?" said the doctor anxiously. "A pain anywhere inside?"

"No, father, only I seem to hurt all over, I'm so sore. But how's my pony?"

"Let the pony wait, boy. I want to be certain that you have no serious hurt. Wait a minute. Let me try."

The doctor began his examination, and question after question came. "Does that hurt?—Does this?—Now then, do you feel anything when I press here—or there—or there?"

"Yes—yes—yes!" cried the boy petulantly, as he winced and started and cried "Oh!" and "Ah!" and "I say, father!" and "Oh, please don't!"

"I must make sure, my boy."

"But I'm sure, father; won't that do?" cried the boy, in a tone of remonstrance. "Of course all that hurts me; you pulled and pinched me about so. I was as sore as sore

all over before you began, and now I'm ever so much worse."

"No, you're not, boy. You're all right. There's nothing broken. You're bruised and strained, but that's all. You'll soon come right. Sleep well?"

"Part of the time, father. The rest was all waste, and I lay there feeling as if I ought to be keeping the watch, and thinking that some one else ought to be sleeping who could."

"But you were sleeping soundly when I came."

"Of course, father. I wanted to make up for lost time."

"And you feel now as if you can't touch food?"

Chris stared.

"Are you saying that as a joke, father?"

"Certainly not. You feel as if you had no appetite?"

"That I don't, father. I feel as if I could eat anything."

"Nothing the matter at all but stiff. That will soon pass off."

"Then you're not going to mix up anything horrid for me, father?"

"Nothing worse than tea or coffee; and you may have damper and bacon to take afterwards," said the doctor, laughing. "Have a good wash and rub out in the sunshine before breakfast. Then eat a good meal and lie about all day again in the sunshine."

"What for, father?"

"To give nature time to get your bruises right."

"But you won't tell me how my pony is—and he's worse than I am. Don't say he's dead, father?" cried the boy piteously, for the doctor's face looked very serious.

"Certainly not. Poor beast, he's far more stiff and sore than you are, besides having all those bad wounds."

"But they're getting better?" cried Chris anxiously.

"They're no worse, my boy," replied the doctor, "but they have had no time to get better. I have stopped them from getting into a bad condition, and the poor thing is limping about grazing as if nothing much was the matter. Are you satisfied?"

"Oh yes," cried Chris eagerly, as he rose and began to try himself in different attitudes. "It has done me good to hear it. I—I don't think I'm quite so stiff this morning."

"That's right."

"Are we going on to-day?"

"On? No. We're prisoners; and besides, we couldn't start with you and your pony in hospital."

"What about the Indians?"

"We haven't seen a sign of them. They're either laying some trap for us, or they have been regularly sickened and have stolen away in the night."

"Are you going to see?"

"Perhaps," said the doctor; "but I'm more disposed to keep a quiet look-out, and rest. We're quite safe here, and provisions are more plentiful than I thought for. Griggs has found the spoor of some big buck and his young does. They have straggled into the valley during the night."

"That's good news, father."

"For the larder: yes. What do you say to taking up land here and making a fresh start in life?"

"Wouldn't do, father," said the boy, shaking his head. "Too far away from everybody."

"Yes, it would be the life of a hermit. Ready to come out?"

"Yes, I'm going out to the water-bucket, as you advised."

"That's right; go. It will give you an appetite for your breakfast."

It was Ned's turn to keep watch from the observatory, as they termed a little shelter, roughly made on the top terrace; but Chris would have taken his place had not his father interposed.

"But it seems so hard for him to go up there while we're having a good meal down here," said Chris wistfully.

"He shall be looked after," said the doctor, "and I don't want you to do much climbing about yet. You must rest."

Chris was silent, and took an opportunity to have a word or two with Ned before he started to climb up the narrow ways.

"That was very good of you, old chap," whispered Ned, gripping his comrade by the left arm, with the result that Chris groaned and ground his teeth.

"Oh, you brute!" he said sharply.

"Chris!—I am sorry."

"What's the good of being sorry? That's the sorest place I've got."

"I didn't know, old chap."

"I did; and I do now," replied Chris, rubbing the spot softly. "Never mind."

"But I do mind. I ought to have thought. Just too when you'd offered to do my work for me so that I could stop down to breakfast."

"Don't say any more about it," said Chris, with a grin of pain in his face dying out before a rather malicious smile. "They won't let me help you one way, so I will in another. I'm precious hungry, and I won't let your breakfast grow cold."

"Oh, thank you, old chap. That's very good of you, for I'm precious hungry too."

"I thought you were," continued Chris, looking quite solemn now. "I'll eat your lot for you."

For a few moments Ned's face was a study. It was so full of dismay. Then there was a look of doubt, and directly after he had read the truth.

"Get out!" he cried, and his hand was raised to give his comrade a heavy slap on the back; but Chris cried "Murder!" and shrank away.

"Oh, I forgot again," cried Ned hurriedly.

"You'd better be off up now, my boy," said Bourne. "Don't forget the glass."

"No, father. All right," cried the boy, and exchanging glances with Chris and following up his own with a clench of the fist, he took the binocular and hurried up to the look-out, while the rest applied themselves to the needed meal, but half-expecting to be alarmed, and impressed

always by the expectation of attack, every one's weapons being kept ready to hand.

Chris ate, as his father said laughingly, like an impostor, a remark which Griggs, who did not join them till the meal had been going on for some minutes, readily endorsed.

Chris laughed, and the remarks did not spoil his appetite; but his thoughts were busy all through, and he looked anxiously for the termination of the meal, and when all was over he turned uneasily to Griggs.

"I say," he whispered, "oughtn't some one to go and relieve Ned?"

"What for?" was the uncompromising response.

"What for? Why, because he must be starving."

"Poor fellow! He must have an appetite then," said Griggs, laughing. "Did you see what I took up to him?"

"Oh," cried Chris remorsefully. "What a shame! Here was I thinking that every one had been selfish to the poor fellow, while all the time——"

"We had all played quite fair—you most of all. Here, how are all the aches and pains now?"

"Getting better. I have no right to make so much fuss about them and play at being in hospital."

"You're not, lad. You're only doing what the doctor ordered. A fellow can't fall nearly a mile perpendicular and slantingdicular without being a good deal shaken."

"How far?" said Chris, laughing.

"Well, say half-a-mile."

"What nonsense!"

"Say quarter of a mile then," cried Griggs sharply.

"Divided by what?"

"You are hard to please. I didn't measure the distance; but I will as soon as we've got rid of these precious red-skins."

"Don't," said Chris. "I didn't fall far, and it was most of it sliding down."

"Turn round," cried the American, "and set your eyes at the very bottom of the cliff, and then run them up to the sharp edge where we saw you having that battle with

your poor mustang before you went over, and then tell me again that you didn't fall far."

"Don't want to," said Chris, who looked all the same, and felt a little shiver as of something cold running down his back. "There, I'm off."

"Where are you going? The doctor said you were to rest."

"That's what I'm going to do," said Chris, "but I must go and see how my pony is."

"Ah, well, I suppose that won't hurt you. I'll go up and have a chat with Ned, and see if I can mark down any of the enemy."

They parted, and Chris walked over the rugged stones and down the slopes till he was at the bottom of the valley, with his feet brushing aside the long rich grass in which the mules were standing knee-deep, and which they neglected for the fresh green branches of the shrubs which grew thickly here and there.

"I forgot all about the snakes," said the boy to himself; "but there can't be any here, or the jacks wouldn't be so quiet."

Quiet they were, for though he walked right through the browsing herd they hardly turned their heads in his direction.

It was different when he reached the half-dozen ponies, which still kept themselves aloof as if preferring their own more aristocratic company. They were so rested and well fed that they were disposed to turn skittish, and two of them communicated their spirits to three of the others, which joined in, tossing their heads, prancing, and making a show of treating their visitor as one who was hiding bridle and bit behind him, ready to entrap and change their pleasant hour's grazing there amongst the rich succulent grass to a mouthful of hard iron with the burden of heavy riders upon their backs.

In fact, five of the ponies contrived to keep the advancing lad at a distance, while the sixth, which had been grazing slowly, suddenly raised its head and stood staring at him.

At the first glance Chris set this down to feebleness, and looked upon it as a bad sign. But he altered his mind directly after, when he walked up to the animal's side, patting its neck and passing its soft ears through his hand, for the poor beast whinnied softly, and slowly advanced its muzzle to rest it against the boy's arm.

"Why, I believe you're better, old chap," cried Chris, as he began to examine the pony's wounds, seeing at once that they appeared to be drying up, while when he moved a yard or two the animal followed him, limping, it is true, but not in a way that suggested permanent injury. "Why, this is cheering," cried Chris eagerly. "I thought that you and I were never going to have a long gallop over the plains again, and now you look as if you'll be ready for me to mount in a fortnight at the most—perhaps in a week, eh, old chap? There, I am glad. I say, I should like as soon as the Indians have gone, for you to carry me up to the head of the valley there, and then for you to show me exactly where it was that you fell, and——Hullo! What's that?"

Chris looked round sharply, but could see nothing but the groups of grazing horses and mules.

"It sounded as if some one had thrown a stone. Can't be Ned stalking me and up to his games, can it?—There it goes again."

He started round to look behind him towards the terraced fortress he had left, but all was quiet there and no sign visible of Ned or any one to play any trick.

Then again something—something, he knew not what; but it was as if a pebble had fallen from the sky.

"Not going to hail, is it?" thought Chris; and then he laughed at the absurdity of the idea, for the sky was perfectly clear.

Rap!

Another something fallen from on high, but the mystery was at an end, for he not only saw it falling but where it had struck, to stick quivering and nearly upright amongst the grass.

An arrow, and from its slope it must have come from

the unexplored side of the valley, and been shot high in the air for it to stand so nearly upright in the grass.

"Indians on the other side," thought Chris, and his first thought was to run round the grazing animals and drive them towards the part where they had made their camp.

He started to do this, but stopped at once, uttering a groan of misery, for in spite of his brave effort, his run proved to be a miserable hobble, and then the agony he suffered in his side forced him to stop.

"Help! help!" he shouted hoarsely, but he felt that his cry sounded like a call to the animals amongst whom he stood, and as far as he could make out there was no one visible to heed his waving hat.

"I must fire my revolver," he thought, and his hand went to his belt to unbutton the leather flap of the holster; but he did not withdraw the weapon, for he knew that the report would scare the poor beasts and send them galloping in all directions.

The time occupied in this was very short, but it was long enough for two more arrows to fall very near him, one nearly upright to cut its way with a sharp whizz amongst the grass and bury its head in the soft earth at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Then another idea struck Chris—tardily, for he felt that he should have thought of it at first.

Thrusting his hand into his breast, he drew forth a little chain, at the end of which was a metal whistle, and the alarm note he blew sounded piercing and shrill.

He did not stop there, but did what he felt was best. Hobbling to the side of his mustang and talking caressingly to it the while, he took hold of the thick forelock and began to lead it towards where he hoped to find safety.

The docile little animal made no opposition to being led from the pleasant pasture, but started and shivered as there came the sharp whizz of another arrow—too painful a memory to his ear—making the poor beast limp along a little faster in obedience to his master's effort to get him away.

Then another arrow came terribly near them, and Chris whistled again, his spirits rising though, for the rest of the animals, taking in the fact of one of them being led away from either corn or water, began to neigh and squeal as they closed in after their leader, so that if there proved to be time enough before the arrows took effect, Chris felt, as he blew a long and shrill note again, that he would be able to guide the herd into safety.

"Why are they not on the look-out?" groaned the boy, for his progress was painfully slow; "they ought to see that something is wrong." But he was ignorant of the fact that nothing was visible from the look-out but himself and the animals trotting about playfully as they kept pretty close to the wounded mustang.

An arrow again, and another, each wonderfully near, but no harm was done. Then another which fell with a dull thud, and was followed by a wild scream which startled the herd into disorder, sending the mules helter-skelter, kicking and plunging, all but one, which galloped away by itself, turning its head the while to bite at an arrow which had buried itself in its back.

That strange scream had done what Chris's whistle failed in, drawn attention to something being wrong, while directly after a little puff of smoke darted from the upper terrace, followed by its report and the reverberation of echoes. Then another shot, and another, and no more arrows fell, though Chris in his slow progress suffered as much agony as if they had still been dropping all around.

But now the doctor came running out, followed by Wilton, and under the cover of a few more shots the little herd was driven in, slowly enough, for the wounded mule progressed more and more slowly till it hung back close alongside of Chris's mustang, showing that it was badly hurt.

"Only enough to prove that the enemy are well on the watch," said the doctor, after he had seen to the wounded mule, "and a warning to us that we must not relax our care."

Griggs had by this time descended from the terrace, it having been his rifle that had put an end to the coming of the arrows.

"Hardly thought they could have shot so far," he said; "but after all, they didn't get an arrow much more than halfway here. Say, didn't do you much good, Master Chris, hurrying back like that."

"I'm afraid it's the mustang that has suffered," said Chris. "I didn't hurt, only it was dreadfully hard to find that I couldn't run."

"You ought to be very thankful that you can walk, Chris," said the doctor quietly. "It is next door to marvellous that you should have escaped without a broken bone. But now then, Griggs, matters begin to look serious. What is to be done?"

"That's just what I have been thinking, sir. The enemy isn't a bit satisfied, and the next time they begin making targets of us they may be more fortunate."

"What I am afraid of is that they may now get upon the high ground above us here."

"And that would be awkward, sir," said the American thoughtfully. Then after a pause—"We've got the whip hand of them with our rifles."

"Of course."

"And we've shown them a little of what we can do, but not enough. There's only one thing left now."

"And what's that?" asked the doctor, after a glance at his son.

"Give them such a lesson that they won't stop to have any more, but make off into the desert."

"That's very good advice," replied the doctor, "but how can it be done without risk to ourselves?"

"Let them think we daren't stir away from here, while we wait for a few days to let some one get well again, and his nag too, while we have not been wasting time, but under the screen of hunting and shooting have been watching, and when once we have got to know where they camp, we must come upon them suddenly some night, and the rifles must do the rest."

"Well, Chris, what do you think of that?" said the doctor, turning to where the two boys sat listening.

"Can't be done," said Chris shortly.

"Why?"

"How are you going to find out where they make their camp? They're in one place to-day and another to-morrow."

"Yes, Griggs, that is the difficulty."

"Well, I know that, sir," replied Griggs; "but can you think of a better plan?"

"Only that of waiting till we see them some time in the open, and then coming out to attack them."

"Half-a-dozen of us against a hundred," said Griggs dryly; "all mounted men who can ride as if they were part of their horses. We could shoot a good many of them, of course, but they'd be too much for us if we killed or wounded fifty of them. For how many of us would go down in doing it?"

"They could spare ten," said Bourne, who had just sauntered up, "while we couldn't spare one."

"No, nor half one," said Griggs. "What we've got to do, gentlemen, is something that will give them such a startler that they'll have had enough of it; and it must be done without our getting a scratch."

"Yes," said the doctor; "but how?"

"That's what we've got to think out, sir. We ought to be a bit cleverer than a set of savage Indians. I vote we all make up our minds to think it out. We've got plenty of time, for we're all right here as to food and shelter, and can't move for a week certain."

"On account of Chris and the injured beasts," said the doctor. "Very well; we must all put on our wisdom caps and puzzle it out. I'll go and have a chat with Wilton now."

The little meeting broke up, and Griggs went to spend his short time before going on duty in cleaning his rifle, while, as if attracted to the same spot, Chris and Ned followed him to a sheltered nook near the place where a bucket was standing ready for sending down to the running water and bringing up re-filled.



CHAPTER XLVIII

THE OTHER SIDE

AS the two boys made their way amongst the scattered stones they caught sight of the doctor stepping out on to the terrace where Wilton stood, glass in hand, scanning the opposite terraces and the sharp edge of the top, where the precipice stood out clear against the sky.

"I wonder whether they'll hit on a good idea," said Ned. "Here, let's sit down. I say, Griggs, you might be a good fellow and give my rifle-barrel a brush out too."

"I don't say I won't," replied the American. "I might give yours a touch up too, squire. I'll see," he continued. "I don't expect you're in very good trim for pumping water through gun-barrels."

"No," said Chris, wincing as he raised his arm and lowered it again as if passing a cleaning rod through the piece.

"Here, steady!" cried Griggs. "Don't take yours to pieces yet. One at a time. We might want to have another shot or two at these red Robin Hoods."

"'Tisn't likely," said Ned.

"Isn't it? You never know what's likely with those gentlemen. While we're out here in the wilds we want to be always ready for action."

The American chatted away as he took his rifle to pieces, washing, carefully drying, and oiling it, in the hot sunshine, while Chris placed himself in a restful position

to avoid aches and pains, and Ned leaned back against a stone with his hands behind his head, never once joining in the conversation. In fact, part of the time he seemed to be dozing, for his eyes were half-closed. At last, though, he started suddenly, made a gesture with his open hand as if catching a fly off his leg, and exclaimed—

“I’ve got it!”

“Kill it, then,” said Griggs, without looking up from his task. “What is it—a skeeter?”

“No,” cried Ned excitedly. “The idea!”

“You have?” said Chris eagerly.

“Yes!”

“Let’s have it, then,” said Griggs, “only be gentle. Don’t startle us too much.”

“Don’t you begin sneering,” said Ned, rather haughtily. “Other people may have bright ideas too.”

“I don’t know about ‘too,’” said Griggs coolly; “I’ve got none. My head has grown thick with thinking of how we’re to get out of this hole.”

Ned was silent, and sat frowning.

“Well, let’s have it,” said Chris.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Ned coldly. “Perhaps you’ve got a better idea of your own.”

“Here, don’t make us hungry with keeping it back,” cried Chris good-humouredly. “What a fellow you are to take offence.”

“Oh, I’m not offended, only I don’t think some people need be ready to jeer quite so soon.”

“‘Some people,’” said Griggs softly. “That means me. Very sorry, and won’t do so any more.”

“And you keep on doing it.”

“Well, never mind,” said Griggs, smiling. “I’m only Murrigan, and you know what we are. Come, let’s have your notion, squire, and if it seems a right one we’ll get out of our trouble like a shot. What was it?”

“Well, I propose,” said Ned reluctantly, “that we take proper steps one night, and startle the Indians’ horses into making a stampede. It could easily be done.”

“And afterwards?” said Chris quietly.

"Why, ride off ourselves and get beyond the redskins' reach. They'd have no horses to follow."

"And they'd never think of running after and catching them," said Chris quietly.

"How could they when the horses had galloped right away? They wouldn't know which way the ponies had gone in the dark."

"But they'd find the trail in the morning, and follow it, if the job took them a week."

"Hear, hear!" cried Griggs, raising the barrels of his rifle to his eyes and looking through them as if they formed a binocular telescope.

"Oh, you're always so ready with your objections," said Ned angrily. "Why couldn't it be done?"

"Just because it would be impossible, I'm afraid, squire," said Griggs, polishing away now at his right barrel. "*If* you had all the horses together, and *if* you could frighten them, they might all rush off, but even if they did it wouldn't matter much, as Chris here hints, because the Indians would follow the trail, and not lose one. Very sorry, squire. Glad if it would do; but it won't, so try again."

Ned uttered a grunt.

"You'd better try now, Chris," he said scornfully, "and old Griggs 'll sit upon your plan directly."

Griggs breathed upon the stock of his rifle, and gave it a hard rub with his piece of rag to bring up the polish upon the walnut grain.

"To be sure I will," he said pleasantly, as he gave Chris a nod. "I'm not going to play with a job like this. Have you got anything like an idea, my lad?"

"I've been trying to think out something," said the boy, turning a little red in the face.

"Let's have it, then," cried Ned.

"To be sure, let's have it," said Griggs, looking proudly at his well-cleaned rifle, before opening the breech and slipping in a couple of cartridges. "There, that's ready. Now, squire, I'll have yours, please."

Ned passed his rifle, after extracting the ball-

cartridge, and the American began taking it to pieces at once.

"What's your notion, my lad?" he said, turning to Chris.

"I'm afraid to say anything about it," said Chris modestly.

"Why?" cried Ned.

"Because it seems now that I have thought it out quite extravagant and strange."

"It can't be worse than mine," cried Ned bitterly. "Come, out with it. Play fair. I don't see why I should be laughed at, and you get off scot free."

"Don't you make yourself uncomfortable about that, squire," said Griggs dryly. "I'll mind and rub him wrong way if there's nothing in it. Now then, my lad, let's have it."

Chris was silent a minute, and then said—

"One word first. My poor pony came down into the valley where I fell, but you don't think the Indians could bring their beasts down that way, do you?"

"I'm sure they couldn't," said Griggs, working the cleaning-rod up and down one of the barrels.

"I feel sure too," said Chris. "But do you think they could get them out again that way—I mean, out through the head of the valley?"

"And I'm sure of that," said Griggs. "They couldn't unless they taught 'em how to fly."

"Why, of course not," said Ned scornfully. "You know it too. Why do you ask?"

"Only because I wanted to make sure," replied Chris, "and because it has something to do with my plan."

Griggs left off pumping and squirting water, laid the barrel across his knees with his hands resting upon the former, and gazed thoughtfully in the boy's face, while Ned seemed influenced by his companion's manner and sat perfectly silent.

"You know I went to watch for the coming of the Indians?"

"Yes," said Griggs.

"And I passed by that rough jagged pillar of rock which was of a great height, in the middle of that very narrow part of the gulch. I mean where the rocks close in on both sides and overhang so that it seems dangerous to walk under them for fear they should fall."

"Oh yes, I remember it well."

"So do I," said Ned, quietly now, for he was evidently greatly interested.

"I looked at it intently, so that I got to know the place thoroughly. I can recollect all the loose stones piled up along the sides and overhanging so that very little would make them block up the rift."

"To be sure," said Griggs, going on with his cleaning again. "I know the spot. You might make a strong fort there in no time so as to defend the valley."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Ned impatiently; "but go on."

"I think I'd better leave off now," said Chris apologetically; "it seems so stupid."

"Never mind; let's have it," cried Griggs.

"Well, this is what I thought," continued Chris, "that if we could go up there some day and hide along the heights with our ponies and mules, and wait till the enemy came by to get into the valley, and then tumble all the rocks and stones down——"

"One minute," said Griggs. "You mean that very, very narrow bit where there's hardly room for two mules to pass?"

"Yes, that's it; where the rocks high up nearly meet."

"Yes, I know," cried Ned excitedly.

"Well, since I've been thinking about all this," said Chris, speaking more freely, "it seemed——"

"One moment again," cried Griggs, "it's this side of the gully down which the enemy came."

"Oh yes, some hundreds of yards."

"To be sure!"

"I say, Griggs, don't keep interrupting so," cried Ned impatiently.

"Right! Go on, lad."

"I fancied," cried Chris, "if we could hide and wait till the enemy had all ridden into the bottom of the valley, we might tumble down stones and rocks from up above till the spaces beside that middle stone were all blocked up, and we might keep on till it was made so bad that no horse could be got over."

"To be sure, nor mule neither. That's for certain if we worked hard enough, and of course we would. Oh, yes; I could make such a bank there with a bar or a wooden lever as no pony could climb, or man either, if you come to that. Why, Chris, my lad, that'll do."

"You don't think it wild and foolish?" said the boy, flushing.

"I think it's grand."

"You do?"

"I do, really, my lad. There's only one thing that I can see against it."

"Ah, here it comes," cried Ned excitedly; "I knew he'd be sure and sit upon it."

"Of course," said Griggs, laughing, "or step upon it to see if it'll bear our weight."

"What's wrong, then?"

"Only this," said Griggs slowly. "How are you going to get your birds into the trap?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Ned. "To be sure. There you are, Chris: how are you going to get your birds into the trap?"

Chris laughed too, but very gently.

"I've been thinking of all that," he said, "and I don't quite see yet. I could manage it easily enough if there was a way out that we could climb. Then we could retreat before them some time, and they'd follow us in; and as soon as they had all ridden in the door of the trap could be closed."

"Who's going to shut the trap?" said Ned, laughing. "Why, Chris, you're making a bull."

"Oh no, I'm not. One or two would be enough to lead the Indians in; the others could shut the trap."

"And what about the live bait that led the Indians in?" said Ned.

"They'd make for the way to get out, and climb up here."

"Well, you are a Paddy," cried Ned, laughing heartily. "You're going to lead the enemy in, and show them the way out again. Can't you see that if they followed the two who acted as bait they'd come out too?"

"Yes," said Chris coolly, "but that wouldn't matter."

"What! Why, you're all in a fog, and can't see your way," cried Ned.

"We're not afraid of the Indians, and we could keep them off easily enough if we wanted to before we got back to our horses and rode away."

"But the enemy would follow," cried Ned, grinning.

"Well, suppose they did?" cried Chris; "they'd be on foot. They could climb out of the trap, but their ponies couldn't."

Griggs laughed now, and Ned looked uncomfortable.

"Oh! I see," he drawled, very slowly. "I didn't think of that."

"Hah!" ejaculated Griggs, who looked very thoughtful. "Yes, that might be done. I don't know of any such place, Chris, unless we could find one somewhere up above the terraces."

"I've looked," said Chris, shaking his head. "If there was a way up there it would be splendid, because we could put big stones ready, or loosen some of the steps so that we could break them away after we'd climbed up; but I can't find anything. The cliff hangs over so."

"Was that why you were poking about so up there this morning?" said Ned.

"Yes."

"Well, you might have told me."

"Yes, I might," said Chris, smiling, "but it would have been a pity."

"Why?"

"It would have spoiled your chance to have a laugh at me and call me a Paddy."

"Hah!" said Griggs again, as Ned frowned and looked annoyed. "And you couldn't find any way up there on to the top?"

"No," said Chris rather sadly. "It would have been so easy then."

"Yes, we could have worked it then, my lad. One would have been enough. I could have carried out a nice game there, and led 'em on."

"And what about their arrows?" said Ned.

"Oh, I should have had to chance them. Kept out of reach, or dodged them. I could have led 'em right in so that they wouldn't have heard the stones being lowered down, and got right away over the top and shut the door after me, while when they saw that they couldn't follow, and went back, they'd have found themselves shut in."

"But—there's—no way out over the top terrace," said Ned mockingly.

"Well, I know there isn't," said Griggs coolly. "I've looked well myself three times over, because I was afraid that the enemy might find a way down some time, and take us by surprise."

"It would have been so easy then," sighed Chris; "but I don't despair. We might find a way, after all, if we had a good search."

"To be sure we might," replied Griggs, "and I think I know where."

"You do?" cried the boys together.

"'M, yes, I think so," said Griggs quietly.

"Where?" cried Chris. "You don't mean up at the head of the valley, where I came down?"

"Nay! That wouldn't do, even if there was a place. Be too far off. You want a spot where one could slip up quickly and shut the way after you so as to stop the enemy from following."

"Yes," said Chris, shaking his head; "and that we shall never find."

"No," cried Ned, almost triumphantly. "Your plan's no better than mine, old chap,"

"I don't know so much about that, squire," said Griggs,

screwing up his face. "Seems to me that we can find such a way out if we try."

"Where?" cried Ned.

"Over yonder, squire," was the reply, as the American nodded his head in the direction of the terraces and openings opposite to where they sat talking.

"Ah!" cried Chris excitedly. "Yes, there must, now one thinks of it, be a way down there. Some of the Indians must have got down a part of the way to send their arrows at me when I was seeing to my poor mustang."

"To be sure! Right!" cried Griggs. "I never thought of that before. Then we've been sleeping here with the door open, only the enemy were afraid to come."

"Then you think we could find a way up there?" said Chris, shading his eyes and looking across the valley at the perpendicular sunlit cliff full of window or door openings similar to those from which they gazed.

"I'm beginning to think we could, my lad. What do you say to going across and having a search?"

"Yes; let's go at once," cried Chris.

"Aren't you too stiff?"

"Stiff? No. Come along!"

At that moment Ned, who had been staring hard at the opposite terraces, suddenly caught Griggs by the arm, gripping it sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"Keep quiet! Don't move," said the boy in a whisper, though no one could have heard from the spot at which he looked. "There's something moving about on that top terrace across yonder."

"A bear?" said Chris eagerly.

"Perhaps. No; it's standing up now."

"Well, bears do that sometimes."

"It's so far off, I can't quite make out," said Ned excitedly. "Ah! There's another—and another. Why, there are six or seven crawling about yonder."

"Then they're not likely to be bears," said Griggs. "Where's your glass?"

"Up in the look-out. I'll go and fetch it."

"Yes, and be smart," cried Griggs. Then, as the boy hurried away to climb up to the watching place—"I won't give any alarm yet till we're quite sure. But if it's the enemy they've some game on there, and there's going to be more sharp shooting. Chris, my lad, there's no doubt about it now. There's a way down from the top of the cliff to that top terrace yonder, and that means there must be a way up to it from below. Your plan's cutting two ways. It's giving us a way to get clear of the enemy, and showing us that we've been in greater danger than we thought for. Now see what you can make out. Your eyes are younger than mine."

"Yes, but yours are better trained to see long distances," replied Chris, as he shaded his eyes and had a good long look, the American changing his position and doing the same.

"I can only see two," said Chris at last, "and I think they're men."

"I can see three," said Griggs, "and I'm not going to say I think, for I'm sure they're Indians."

Chris's first thought was of his mustang.

"What about the mules and ponies?" he said excitedly.

"I don't think their arrows could reach them," said Griggs thoughtfully; "but the brutes mean some mischief, and the sooner we begin to teach them that they are trespassing the better. Can you help me to take a shot at them? Or are you too stiff?"

"I can manage," said Chris, and following the American they encountered Ned returning from the look-out.

"Indians," he cried. "I've looked. They're after the ponies and mules again."

"Have you given the alarm?" cried Chris anxiously.

"No; I came on with the glass. Do you want to use it, Griggs?"

"No," was the reply. "I'm going to shoot, and that will give all the alarm we want."

They proceeded to the second terrace, where the movements of the Indians grew clearer, and going down behind

a stone the American took a long and careful aim before firing.

"Missed him," he said angrily.

The word had hardly left his lips before Chris drew his trigger, and the next moment Ned followed his example.

The reports brought the rest of the party of defenders into the cell from which the firing had been directed.

"Well," said the doctor, "what is it?"

He took the binocular upon hearing the explanation, but after holding it to his eyes for a few moments returned it to Griggs.

"Is it a mistake?" he said.

Griggs laid his cheek to his rifle, and fired again, to stand gazing across the valley for some moments before he replied—

"No, sir; no mistake, and that Indian knows it."

"You hit one?"

"Yes, and there were three more just appeared, but, as far as I could make out, they have all gone now."

There was a little more excitement and watching, but nothing was made out for some minutes. Then the doctor, who had seized the glass and been sweeping the opposite side of the valley in search of danger, exclaimed—

"They've gone. Look, Bourne." He passed the glass to the gentleman addressed. "Across the right, there, over the edge of the cliff."

"Yes, I see; a large party of them cantering away."

At that moment Griggs, who had raised the sight of his rifle, fired again after a rapid glance.

"Man and horse down," cried Bourne.

"Why did you fire again when they were in full retreat?"

"To give them a lesson not to come and interfere with us, sir," said Griggs shortly. "It's too dangerous to trifle with them, sir, and they're getting more daring."

"Yes, I know," said the doctor, "and I wish we could get away from this place; but I dare not stir, for the enemy would follow us and hang on to our skirts, go which way you chose."

"Young Chris had an idea about our getting away, sir," said the man, giving the boy a wink.

"An idea. I should have thought he had only one, and that was connected with getting well again. Well, what is it, Chris?"

The boy explained, his face feeling like fire the while, and his father listened to the end.

"Well," he said at last, "that sounds perfectly reasonable and good. And you think we could, or you could, or whoever undertook the task, could get to the terraces yonder and escape—if there proves to be a way up there?"

"Yes, father," said Chris, flushing with excitement now. "I feel sure there is a way there."

"And you, Griggs—what do you say?"

"I feel sure of it, sir; but whether we could reach it from down below here or not is another thing."

"The only way is to prove it," said the doctor.

"Now, at once, sir?" cried Griggs.

"Well, yes," said the doctor thoughtfully; "why not?"

He asked the question in a tone of voice that needed no answer, and then turned to Chris.

"We'll go and examine the place, then, for the Indians must be gone."

"Oh yes," said Griggs, "they're gone, sure enough. But it would be as well for say two to stop here on the terrace and be ready to fire if the enemy should appear again."

This was soon arranged, Wilton and Bourne undertaking the task, while, after a good look round to make sure that no watching eyes were scrutinizing their movements, the little party of four started for the other side of the depression, Chris being so insistent that he felt really well enough to be one, that the doctor shrank from leaving him behind.

The task did not prove very difficult, for they had their previous experience to help them, and they were not long after reaching the foot of the cliff before finding a way up to the lowest terrace and grasping the fact that the incident that had taken place in the part they had

occupied had been repeated here. Whether before or after it was impossible to say, but they found all the traces of a desperate fight, and the defence of a brave people who had held out in cell after cell to the very end.

Then the way up to the next terrace was hunted out and found half buried in stones and dust, and hidden still further by the growth of ages. Here again were the traces of the massacre, and after a hurried examination of these, half-way along the second terrace Griggs came to a sudden stop and cocked his rifle, an act immediately imitated by the rest.

"Danger?" whispered the doctor.

"Don't know yet," was the reply, "but we're somewhere near the cells where those fellows were using their bows the other day, and where I saw them a little while ago."

He ceased speaking, and pointed downwards.

"What can you see?" whispered Chris.

"Trail. Moccasin-covered feet," was the answer.

The two boys would have passed that which was pointed out unseen, for the impressions in the dust were very faint to them, but plain enough to the experienced hunter, who advanced cautiously now to the opening into the cell opposite which they were now standing, and looking in, pointed out fresh footprints and, what was more, an opening at the back of the cell which, save in position, proved to be a way into just such a square cell-like place as that which had puzzled them on their own side.

"No one here," said Griggs, "but it's not long since there was."

"Are you going on at once?" said the doctor.

"Oh yes; let's know the worst, or the best," replied Griggs; "but one seems to know all there is to know, and it's what we wanted. Here's the way up to the next range of cells, and when we get up there we shall find the enemy's trail, and that will lead right up to the cliff, without a doubt."

"Yes, there's proof enough that if the enemy had been enterprising and gifted with brains they could have easily found their way down into the valley by a fresh way."

"Let's go on, sir," said Griggs. "They've never been lower than this; that's evident. We're the first who have come up that lower way, and it seems to me, Chris, that we've learned all we wanted. That was to find a way to the top that a fellow could get up in a hurry. Yes—look here. It's all clear enough; and once he's got up he's got nothing to do but break away a step or two, and no one can follow."

Griggs was quite right. Just as it was on the other side of the valley, the square pit could be ascended by means of projecting stones, and upon these being scaled the party stood upon the flint terrace and in its range of cells, beyond which there was a step-like path going up a narrow rift, leading right to the level tableland.

They all ascended, and taking care not to expose themselves, were able to sweep the great level for miles, but without seeing the slightest sign of an enemy.

"It's all right, sir," said Griggs, as soon as they had finished their inspection. "Here's what we want to carry out young Chris's plan."

"Well, it does make it possible," said the doctor thoughtfully, "but very risky for the man who is hunted by the enemy."

"Oh dear no, sir. It only wants a man to be pretty smart. I don't see much difficulty in it."

"No, father," said Chris; "I feel sure that I could do it."

"Nay, don't want everything, youngster," cried Griggs merrily; "let some one else have a chance. This job seems to be about my fit, and I propose that the doctor here picks me out, unless squire here chooses himself as the one to do it."

"Oh no," cried Ned; "I couldn't do it. I mean, I shan't go. I don't think I could do it."

"It's a grown man's job," said the doctor firmly, "one that either Griggs or I will undertake. There, come down, and let's carefully hide the way by which we came up. The enemy may come here again to get a shot at us, and if they do we must not give them a chance for growing suspicious."

“If they come, sir,” said Griggs. “I don’t think they will—at all events to-day. What they’ll try in the night no one can say. But now then, Chris, my lad, you and your mustang have got to make yourselves fit for everything. We can do nothing till you’re both quite well, and the sooner that time comes the sooner we shall be strong enough to act.”





CHAPTER XLIX

GRIGGS IS STUBBORN

THE days glided by, with the stiffness in Chris Lee's limbs growing less painful, and the pony recovering fast, for the clear mountain air seemed to act like a cure for wounds. Every day that came showed the injured animal in better condition. Its efforts to move no longer made Chris wince and forget his own pains in those he felt at seeing the mustang suffer.

Every one was busy, for the keeping watch regularly took up a good deal of time. Then shooting had to be attended to, so as to keep up a good supply of fresh meat, till the birds upon which the party depended grew shy of coming to the spring, and two or three anxious discussions had been held about supplies for the future, the result of which was that a decision had been arrived at, for a departure to be made as soon as possible.

Chris was quite strong enough—so he declared—and at last every hour seemed to make an improvement in the mustang.

“It's all nonsense, Ned,” cried Chris, “for them to think they are staying on account of us.—Hullo, Griggs! Were you listening?”

“Nay; I was close here, and your chatter came rattling into my ears like peas. We're not waiting for you now. How did your pony go this morning?”

"Splendid. Just halted a little on the bad leg; but it's better than it was yesterday."

"Did you canter this morning?"

"Canter? We went at a good swinging gallop."

"And what about you?"

"Oh, I'm only a little stiff still. Here, I want for us to be off. We shall get strong more quickly journeying over the plains or climbing in and out among the mountains. I don't like to bother my father any more, but what does he say?"

"He says we're to start to-morrow at daybreak."

"Hurrah!" cried Chris.

"But we shan't, my lad."

"Why not?"

"Because I've seen Indians again."

"Oh! You're always seeing Indians again. Here it has been—one day and you declared that they were gone; then the very next day you've seen them again."

"Well, they showed themselves to me; I didn't want them," said Griggs dryly. "They're an artful lot. Never been away at all, I believe. We couldn't see 'em, but if we'd made a start they'd have been close upon our heels directly."

"Ah, you'll have to trap them, Chris," said Ned maliciously.

"Look here; if you say that again we shall quarrel."

"Hear that, Griggs?"

"Oh yes, I hear. Serve you right. Why don't you drop all that teasing? If you can't show us a better way you had better hold your tongue."

"Very well; I can do that," said Ned haughtily.

"There, that's enough," cried Chris. "Don't be so petty, Ned. We've got something else to think about besides teasing and bantering."

"That's right," cried Griggs. "Look here, lads. I've just been trying that place again. I started from the mouth of the valley, and ran in and out among the rocks and trees, got to the foot of the way up quickly, and then acted just as if I had the Indians after me."

I've no doubt about it now. Once I could get them after me, I could lead them a pretty race, and dodge in and out till I reached the path up to the terrace over the way, scuttle up, and let down stones enough to stop them from coming after me, so that I don't believe they could clear the way for a week."

"Then you are ready to try at any time?"

"Any time the doctor likes."

"But what about the arrows?" said Ned.

"I'm not afraid of them hitting me, my lad," said Griggs confidently. "Being shot at by fellows with bows and arrows sounds bad enough, but there's not much risk here."

"I don't know about that," said Chris anxiously.

"Don't you? Well, I do. I should be running fast and dodging in and out among the rocks and trees. That would make it hard shooting for a man standing still, wouldn't it?"

"Yes; of course," said Chris, with a dubious look all the same.

"But the enemy won't be standing still," continued Griggs. "They'll be galloping after me as hard as they can come, not that it will be very fast, for mounted men can't get along very well among rocks and trees. What's more, they can't shoot straight with their ponies cantering. I don't believe there's a bit of risk for me. I shall be all right. What I'm afraid of is that when I come along through the narrows with the whole herd full pelt after me, some of the mules and ponies will squeal or neigh, and make the enemy suspicious. If they do hear anything, we're done."

"But our animals will be well back in that hollow," said Chris.

"Yes, my lad; but I want them to be planted farther back still. There's a bit I've been looking out quite a quarter of a mile farther off, and I'm going to propose it to the doctor as being safest."

"I'm afraid father will say that the ponies ought to be close at hand."

"Yes, that's right, if it can be done; but it would go hard with us all if the Indians gave up the bait of the trap and turned upon those who set it. We mustn't run risks if there's a way of doing things more safely."

"Well, you must talk it over with father," said Chris. "Let's see; we're going to have another look at the place this afternoon, aren't we?"

"We were," replied the American; "but we're not going now."

"Why?"

"Too many redskins about, as I told you."

"There are always too many redskins about," cried Chris impatiently. "I wish we could charge them boldly, and send them flying over the plains."

"Never to come back again," said Ned sharply.

"Yes, that would be very nice, my lads," replied Griggs; "but it will not do to be impatient."

"*Impatient!*" cried Ned. "We've been patient enough."

"Not quite, my lads. Don't you see that we're playing a very ticklish game? The plan is to get out of this valley ourselves, where we are regularly locked in, and to put the redskins in our place, locking them in. It would be rather remarkable if it wasn't a ticklish job."

Just then the doctor came into the shelter where the boys had been talking, bringing with him Wilton, who had been shooting, or rather, trying to shoot, for he had had no success; and they too were talking earnestly about ways and means.

"Oh, here you are, Griggs," cried the doctor. "Had a good turn at scouting?"

"Yes, sir."

"And all seems favourable for our attempt to-morrow?"

"No, sir. The Indians have shifted their quarters, and they're in about as awkward a position as they could contrive for our purpose."

"Then what do you propose?"

"Nothing, sir, but wait."

"But we really cannot wait any longer, Griggs. Provisions failing too fast. We must get away from here to

some good hunting-ground. Do the Indians seem to be camping, or only on the move?"

"They seem to me to be hatching up some dodge or another," replied Griggs. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we saw them over the way there—just one or two, scouting; and if we do I should be for a stand at arms all night, for it might mean an attack after dark."

The doctor stood at the opening, looking across the valley, as if impressed by the American's words and expecting moment by moment to see one of the Indians creeping along the edge of the cliff.

Then he began to walk up and down slowly, evidently deep in thought.

At last he started, as he suddenly became aware of the fact that every one present was watching him keenly waiting for him to speak.

"There," he said, "I've made up my mind. It is very evident that we may wait here till our stores are exhausted, and be as far off the opportunity we seek as ever. The Indians can wait; we cannot, and they seem to know it. I believe they feel that if they are patient their opportunity will come. I have felt something of the kind, but I am convinced now that it will not, and that we must chance something and make it."

"Going to give up young Chris's plan?" said Griggs slowly.

"No; I'm going to put it in force at once. We start to-night."

A thrill of excitement ran through Chris, and his heart began to beat. Then he was listening, so to speak, with all his might.

"We shall make no particular movement till after dark," continued the doctor, "only go on as usual apparently, in case there are eyes watching us, as is most likely to be the case."

Griggs nodded his head.

"But all the same we can be making our preparations. The barrels can be filled with water, and every one's bottle. Provisions can be packed in our wallets; in fact,

everything held ready for a start. Finally, just at dusk the animals can be driven in for food and water, and——”

The doctor stopped, and looked full in the American's eyes.

“Not allowed to go off again?”

“Exactly,” replied the doctor. “But before any more is said, Griggs, I want to offer you the opportunity to draw back.”

“What for?” said Griggs sharply.

“Because it is a very risky thing to do. You propose offering yourself for a mark to the Indians' arrows, and——”

“Not a bit of it, sir. I'm going to take care they don't hit me.”

“Yes, yes, but you know what I mean.”

“Right; I do, neighbour, and it's very handsome of you to offer me the chance to back out. But I'm not going to. I've made up my mind that it's about twice as risky to hold back, for sure as the United States are the finest in the world, if we stop here much longer these cunning savages will give us a surprise which will end in their losing a lot of men through shot-holes in different parts of their persons; but those who escape being hurt will have the satisfaction of taking possession of all the traps of half-a-dozen folk who came to look for gold, but found only a place to lay their bones alongside of some other folks who got into trouble here ages and ages ago.”

“Then you mean to hold to your plan?”

“I mean to do a bit to carry out young Chris's plan, and shut up the redskins for a week or two, perhaps a month, while we get right away.”

“There is a horrible side to it, Griggs.”

“Would be if we let them get the better of us, sir.”

“You mean the shutting up the enemy here to starve?” said Bourne.

“Tchah!” ejaculated Griggs, so sharply that the boys started. “Serve 'em right if they did, sir. What business have they to want our scalps? But we shouldn't shut them up to starve. They'd have weeks of work before they could get their horses out, but without horses

they'd be out in a week. Starve? Nonsense! They'd have the water; they can make fires, and cook their horses. It takes a deal to starve a redskin. But there, I don't want to make speeches. It's all settled, gentlemen. But you've got to tell the look-out what's coming off."

"I'm going up to have a few words there at once," said the doctor. "Now, every one understands that he is to be ready, without showing any watchful Indian scout that there is something on the way."

No one spoke, but the looks directed at the doctor gave answers enough, and the afternoon was spent in preparation for what all felt might prove the most momentous adventure of their lives.





CHAPTER L

WORKING THE ORACLE

THE evening drew near at last, with everything made ready that was possible. The water and provisions near at hand; saddles and bridles examined; and according to his custom, Chris was about to go out into the valley and see to his pony, examining the wounds and giving him something a little extra in the way of food, when Griggs came and joined him.

"Don't start," he said, "but go on just as usual."

"Something wrong?" said Chris, doing exactly what he had been told not to do.

"Call it something wrong if you like," said Griggs, laughing; "but it's only what I expected. I've been up at the look-out with your father, and we made out two Indians crawling to the top of the cliff over there, just like a couple of big red slugs on a wet night."

"Then they're watching us?" panted Chris.

"Just as they always have been, my lad, and looking out to try and turn us into pin-cushions for their arrows, if we'd only go out far enough, which we wouldn't do on any consideration."

"But this will quite upset our plans for to-night," said Chris.

"Oh no. We shall go on; for this looks promising, my lad. They've always been watching us more or less."

"Then they've seen us hunting for a hiding-place for the ponies and mules?"

"Yes, of course."

"And climbing about among the rocks at the narrows?"

"To be sure they have."

"Then what's the good of our going on?"

"Everything is the good. They've seen everything we've done, but they couldn't think with our brains, could they, my lad?"

"But what could they think of our hunting about as we did?"

"Well, seeing that I made a point of shooting a bird or two each time we were planning out our places and all we meant to do, I should say that they thought we were providing for the pot. Now then, come and have a turn at your pony, and spend a good deal of time looking at his hurts. You'd better ask me some questions about them, and lift up his hoofs and point at them."

"Yes, I see," said Chris.

"P'raps I shall act a bit too for our friends' benefit, so don't be surprised. Then we shall end up by driving all the beasts in for the night close up under the shelter of our fire."

"Shall we be saluted with any arrows, do you think?"

"No," said Griggs; "I don't think so. We've rather sickened them of that. They know there are rifles, and good shots, up at the top yonder, and I dare say some of them have been hit. Now, come along."

The pair strolled out towards where the animals were grazing, and went through the bit of performance arranged, Chris marvelling the while at the perfect coolness displayed by his companion, who was on the brink of a most daring adventure, the very thought of which sent the blood dancing through the boy's veins and made the palms of his hands turn wet.

The shades of night were approaching as, after a long examination of Chris's pony, the animals were headed towards the camp, and driven slowly in towards where they were regularly watered every night; and so well had all

the preparations been timed that it was too dark for any scouts on the opposite side to see that after the watering, every beast was hobbled and held in readiness for the start that was to be made.

And now the business preparatory to the start was set about eagerly. The mules were laden with the much-reduced loads. Skeeter had his, but his bell was muffled so that it would be perfectly silent, and the water-barrels were hung in position across the back of their regular bearer.

There was plenty of time, and the doctor's principal efforts were directed towards arresting hurry, for he had to allow for the Indian scouts to make their way back to the camp from which they came.

"If they have gone back," he said, in a low voice, as the adventurous party sat together talking in a low tone, each with his weapons ready.

"Yes," said Wilton, "if they have gone back. Suppose they have chosen this of all nights for an attack!"

"They'll find that we are quite ready for them; that's all," said Griggs coolly.

"But it is possible," said Bourne sadly.

"So's everything else, sir," replied the American. "But don't you think it's a pity to begin fancying what might happen?"

"Perhaps so," said Bourne. "I beg pardon; I'm afraid I do anticipate a good deal. Well, boys," he added, turning to where the pair sat together whispering, "how do you feel about to-night's work?"

"Horrid, father," whispered Ned, as if he felt that Indians might be listening.

"And you, Chris?" continued Bourne.

"I feel as if I shall be glad when it's to-morrow and we know the worst."

"Or the best, my boy," said the doctor cheerily. "There, I think we might start now. The moon has set, and we have a long dark night before us for our work. What do you say, Griggs? Ready?"

"And willing, sir. I go first, don't I?"

"Yes, with Chris as advance-guard. You know the

signal if the Indians are coming on to an attack—one shot each, and then you stand fast to give us time to start the train back before coming to your support.”

“Yes, sir; it’s all cut deep into me, but I don’t think we shall have any trouble there.”

“I hope not,” said the doctor.

Within half-an-hour from these words being spoken the little baggage-train was in motion, dimly seen beneath the band of stars overhead. These stood out strongly marked against the edge of the black cliffs on either side towering up and seeming to the excited imagination of the two lads double their real height, and overhanging more and more as the valley sides gradually closed in towards the mouth of the gulch.

Chris suffered from a peculiar sense of excitement and dread of attack, as he and Griggs rode cautiously on through the darkness, each with his rifle cocked and resting upon his knee, straining his eyes the while for the first sign of danger. And it was during this ride that the boy began to wonder whether the eyesight of the Indians was much better than their own, for he soon found that once more he was obliged to leave out any attempt at guidance and trust entirely to his pony.

“Think the enemy can see better than we do?” he ventured to say, during a temporary halt to make out if possible what had caused a sudden rushing sound through the bushes in front.

“They’re made differently to what we are if they can,” whispered the American dryly. “I’m leaving everything to my nag, and you’d better do the same.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing,” said Chris. “You don’t think that was an Indian, then?”

“No; only some little animal that we started. It sounded loud because everything’s so still, and we expect that everything means danger. Keep close behind me now.”

Chris had no occasion to trouble himself, for his mustang kept its nose very near to its companion’s tail, and they went on and on through the darkness, till Griggs suddenly drew rein.

"Here we are," he whispered. "It's narrow enough, and it oughtn't to take many minutes to stop this gap so that no horse could get through, while in an hour it might be made so that it would take a week to make it passable. Come along, and mind we don't miss the gully."

He led on again slowly, pausing at intervals to listen and make sure, for it seemed to be darker than ever, in spite of their growing accustomed to the gloom.

Once more Griggs stopped short, and Chris's heart began to beat more heavily than ever during the few minutes' silence that ensued.

"I'm done," whispered Griggs at last.

"What do you mean? What's the matter?" asked Chris.

"The gully ought to be somewhere about here, but for the life of me I can't make out where it is, and we must wait till morning."

Chris laughed softly.

"I don't see anything to grin at," grumbled Griggs. "I don't believe any Indian could find his way along here."

"I was laughing because I could find the place."

"How?" asked Griggs sharply.

"By coming first. My pony knows his way here."

"Come in front," said Griggs shortly, and Chris moved forward, gave the pony his head once more, and the clever little animal paced steadily on for about a hundred yards, and then turned off to its left and began to ascend.

"Hah! Who wouldn't be a pony!" said Griggs, as Chris drew rein. "Then all we have to do now is to wait till they come up."

It did not seem long before the doctor joined them, and then the whole train filed up the side gully. Steadily ascending the way ran up towards the tableland, where the grassy patch in a hollow had been selected off the track, and here the halt was made, the beasts beginning to graze at once after they had been hobbled, both ponies and mules, and seeming quite at home as soon as they were left to themselves.

"It's a risk indeed," said the doctor. "If the Indians

should happen to ride in this direction, where should we be?"

"Shooting at them would be the best thing," said Wilton.

"It's a thousand to one against their finding the beasts here," said Griggs, "even if they did happen to come. But we've got to chance it, sir. Everything's gone right so far, and let's hope we shall keep on the same track."

"I hope so," replied the doctor. "Then now we have nothing to do but get back to the narrow gateway."

"The sooner the better, sir, for the night's wearing away fast."

"But ought we, after all, to leave one of us in charge of the beasts here?"

"No, sir," said Griggs sharply. "You'll want all your strength after I've passed, to tumble down the rocks. The more the better. It mustn't be half done."

"No," said the doctor gravely. "The entrance must be well blocked. All ready?"

"Yes," came in a whisper.

"Back, then, at once. Griggs will lead, and all keep in touch, and observe perfect silence."

The distance seemed to have doubled before they got to the descent, and this slope to be three times as long, as they tramped slowly down into the gulch, where the doctor called a halt once more.

But all was still, and blacker than ever, as Griggs with Chris at his side turned off to the right, to lead the party slowly onward towards the narrows, where all stood at last, hot and weary.

"Everything seems to have stretched out," said Griggs, in a whisper. "I thought we were never going to get here." Then to the doctor, "We'd better wait till day begins to break before you climb up the sides, eh?"

"No," said the doctor; "that might mean failure. Every one must be in his place before the darkness fails us."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, sir; but make sure as soon as there's light enough that every one is well hidden. Birds will not enter a trap if they see anything strange."

"Nor Indians neither," said the doctor quietly. "We shall see to that."

"And you'll let them get well out of hearing before you begin to stop the gap?"

"Of course," said the doctor.

"That's all right, then," said Griggs. "So now, as you are going to divide into two parties, each to take a side, I'll say good-bye and stop below."

"One word more, then," said the doctor, grasping the American's hand. "Let's repeat our plans so that there may be no misunderstanding."

"That's right, sir. I'll say my lesson. As soon as it's daybreak I shall move down the gully right on in the direction where I believe the Indians are encamped, and as soon as I think I'm near enough I'm going to begin shooting wherever I see a chance and picking up my birds, till the Indians hear me and come out to see what's the matter. Then we suppose they'll mount, the whole herd of them, and come after me."

"Mounted men against one on foot," said the doctor, with a sigh.

"I don't suppose they'll catch me," said Griggs coolly. "Well, naturally enough when I see the enemy after me I begin to run."

"But suppose they don't all come, Griggs?" said Chris.

"Shan't suppose anything of the kind, and don't you talk so loudly," growled the American. "They've all got to be there, according to my notions, and come crowding after me. I run as I never ran before, straight for the narrow way here, dash through, making for the old camp, and they tear away to cut me off before I can get under cover of our marksmen. But all at once I dodge in among the stones and begin to climb up to the terraces, get up to the top step-way in the square pit, and loosen out the stones there, after blocking the place below. One of these two bits of work is bound to keep those who have dismounted to climb after me from climbing any farther, and when I begin to fire at them pretty sharply they'll turn back at once, get to their horses, and join their mates, to

have a palaver and come to the conclusion that it isn't safe to stop in the valley, because they'll be expecting every moment for fire to be opened by us. Then they'll ride back without another shot being fired at them, for the simple reason that I'm hurrying round to join your people here by the top way and the gully. I shan't lose any time, and if I'm lucky I may get here soon enough to join you in giving the enemy a few bullets when they come riding back to find their way stopped."

"As it ought to be," said the doctor dubiously.

"As it has got to be," said Griggs sharply. "Got to be—got to be, and must be!" he cried.

"If all goes well," said Bourne.

"If all goes well, sir," said Griggs, "and if we all do our parts like men, it will. Good-bye!"





CHAPTER LI

LOOSENING THE STONES

“**S**TOP, Griggs!” cried Chris in a hoarse whisper, for he dared not shout; but it seemed as if their brave companion had not heard. One minute he was talking with them, the next he was gone, and had hardly made a sound.

“Hah!” sighed the doctor. “Now it has come to the point I feel as if we have let the gallant fellow go straight to his death.”

“Lee!” cried Bourne in a voice of anguish. “Don’t say that!”

“I have said it,” said the doctor bitterly; “and now it is too late I feel that it is true. The whole business looks black, and as desperate as our mad search out here for the old golden city.”

He ceased speaking, and Chris gripped Ned by the arm, for he shared his father’s feeling of despair.

The silence was broken by Bourne.

“It is too late to look back,” he said gravely. “We have made the venture, and must carry it out like men.”

“Of course,” cried Wilton firmly. “Come, doctor, you are captain. I don’t call this square of you to put us all out of heart. This is making the worst of it, with a vengeance.”

“Yes, it is—it is,” said the doctor quickly. “You must forgive me. Every man has his weak moments, and this

was one of mine. I felt as if I had sacrificed the poor fellow to this desperate attempt to escape."

"Yes, father," cried Chris bitterly. "It was my idea, and you ought to have let me go with him."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Wilton.

"What are you laughing at?" cried Chris fiercely.

"You—your words came in with such a droll ring in them. But there, we ought not to be talking now, but getting up into our hiding-places—eh, doctor?"

"Yes," was the sharp reply, "at once. You, Wilton, Bourne, and Ned. You, Chris, with me. Have you got the crowbar, my boy?"

"Yes, father."

"You others have the tent-pitchers, and I the short pole. Take your places at once; lie right down among the bushes till you hear my whistle, and then up and send the big stones down with all your might."

No more was said, for not one present had the heart to speak. To Chris it was just as if he had said "Good-bye" to the American, who had gone straight to his death.

"And he has gone thinking me queer and ungrateful," the boy said to himself, "for not insisting upon going with him."

And even while stumbling up and up among the stones and bushes in the darkness to the spot which he was to occupy with his father, the boy could think of nothing else but the brave fellow going slowly along the lower part of the gulch in the black darkness, to wait until the morning came before starting boldly off into the open to meet the Indians.

"It will mean arrows," thought Chris. "He'll be shot down somewhere out yonder, for it's a mad trick, and can't do him any good, nor yet us. Oh, I do wish I wasn't such an idiot! So proud I was in my miserable conceit of having thought out a way to trap the Indians, and a nice mess I've made—sent the best friend I ever had to certain death."

"What are you thinking about, Chris?" said the doctor at that moment.

"Thinking about, father?" faltered the boy.

"Yes; you have turned so quiet."

"I was thinking about poor Griggs, father, and feeling afraid that he'll never come back."

"Then don't think any more of such things. We none of us know. Wait and see. Now then, how long shall we have to wait before we see our brave fellow come along hunted by the enemy?"

"Don't ask me, father."

"Why not? How far are we off the morning?"

"Hours."

"No; I think not. I dare say we shall be having the day break within one hour, then the exciting time will begin."

"Do you think we shall see Griggs again?"

"Oh yes, of course. He's a fleet runner, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised to see him come tearing along with a band of mounted Indians at his back."

"Do you really think so, father, or is this only to encourage me?"

"Both, my boy. Come, keep a good heart. I shall be glad when the day comes—shan't you?"

"Yes, father. But do you think the ponies and mules will stray away?"

"I hope not, my boy. Oh no, it's not likely. Cheer up; we shall do it, never fear."

Chris heaved a big sigh.

"Why, hullo, my boy! Do you call this cheering up?" said the doctor.

"Yes, father. That was only the melancholy being driven off," said Chris with a forced laugh. "I'm going to be cheerful enough, and shoot straight when the Indians come. I'm sorry for them, but I must, for everybody's sake."

"Yes, to be sure, for everybody's sake. Feel better?"

"Yes, father."

"That's right. I was low-spirited, too, a little while ago, for I felt doubtful of success. I don't now. Yours was a splendid idea, and unless something unfortunate occurs we shall succeed."

"I hope we shall," thought Chris, but he felt doleful in the extreme, and the idea would force itself upon him that he had sent his old friend to a cruel death.

At last the various objects around seemed to grow plain as the grey dawn began to lighten the sky; but the place looked terrible in the ghastly light. There beneath them was what looked like a black chasm, the one they were to fill up with stones from the jagged shelves upon which they crouched nearly a hundred feet higher, while higher still, right up for another three hundred feet or more, to where the saw-like edge was marked clearly against the ever-lightening sky, wherever the boy's eyes rested there were masses of stone which looked as if a touch would set them in motion and start others to come thundering down, sweeping all before them into a vast heap which would fill up the chasm, even as high as the rocks amongst which his party was hidden.

The time had come for hiding, and Chris and his father were soon lying down behind some stunted bushes through which they could peer right along the bottom of the gulch far away towards where the side gully ran up in the direction of the tableland in which the great valley with its rock city was cut.

Thoughts began to come fast now through Chris's brain, and the first were in connection with the mules and ponies they had left to graze up to the right of the gully. Would they stay there peacefully browsing on the green shoots of the shrubs that were abundant, or come wandering down to reach their old pasture? The question was open to many doubtful answers which did not come, and they had to give way to thoughts connected with Griggs, who, the boy felt, must by this time be astir with his gun.

And with what result?

None for a long, long time, during which the sun as it rose had chased away the horrors that had lingered in the gulch, to display all its wondrous glories of light and shade with trickling falls and clumps of dripping lace-like fern.

Everything was so beautiful in the sunshine that Chris

found himself wondering how it could have been so dismal in the gloom.

He turned to look across to where his friends were hidden, but they were concealed too well; nothing was visible but the great blocks of stone waiting to be levered to the edge of the shelf and sent thundering down; so turning his eyes from there, the lad gazed along the gulch again in the direction of the side gully and the open land beyond, where in all probability Griggs was now wandering in his fictitious search for game.

Two hours of patient waiting since sunrise, which had given place to painful excitement. Doubt was busy, too, in every brain, for it began to seem as if something had gone wrong, and the intense desire was attacking Chris to get down from his hiding-place and go in search of his friend.

But the orders were to lie still in hiding until the doctor gave the signal with his whistle, and knowing full well that the slightest suggestion of an ambush meant ruin to the plan, Chris forced himself to lie motionless, gazing with aching eyeballs along the gulch for the sight of the figure that as the time went on seemed as if it would never appear.

Another hour, the most hopeless of all, the most wearisome and full of pain, for with the sun getting higher the rays were reflected from the rock-face till the place grew unbearably hot, with the consequence that thirst began to parch the watcher's throat. He was growing faint, too, for want of food, and though he had an ample supply in his wallet he did not dare to begin eating for fear that something might happen, some sudden call be made upon his energies.

"If I could only get up and move about," thought Chris.

But he glanced round, and no one else was stirring, while his father crouched there so severe and stern of aspect that for the moment Chris forgot his own troubles and thought of those of others.

"Father's feeling it all horribly," thought the boy.

"But poor old Griggs! We ought never to have let him go."

What was that?

Chris strained his ears and gazed upward wildly, for high in front, nearly four hundred feet above the bottom of the gully, there was the sound of galloping horses.

The boy shook himself and stared, asking himself if he were mad or dreaming. For the rocks up there were more than perpendicular, they leaned right over, and it was absurd to think that horses were galloping there.

They could not be. They were not, for they were on the other side of the gulch now, higher still.

"It's the heat," said Chris with a sigh. "I'm giddy, I suppose."

"Hist!"

The warning word came from his father, and a thrill of excitement ran through the boy as he felt that it was no fancy but the echoing of galloping horses to which he was listening, while the next minute as the reverberation grew louder, a spasm, half joy, half fear, ran through him as, like a flash, the familiar figure of the American glanced in the sunshine, disappeared in the shade, and came into sight again, with head down, fists doubled and held close to his breast, as he came running rapidly along the bottom of the gulch.

The next minute he had reached the narrow chasm above which Chris and his friends lay waiting, disappeared, and the inclination that nearly carried Chris away was to spring up, shout words of encouragement, and then clamber to where he could follow the swift runner with his eyes till he went out of sight at some turn of the gulch on his way to the valley.

But the orders were to lie close till the whistle rang out, and like the rest, who were influenced by the same feeling, Chris crouched lower to gaze right away in the old direction, listening with straining nerves to the ever-nearing echoing beat of horses' hoofs, till about a couple of hundred yards away a mounted Indian, bow and arrow

in one hand, rein in the other, bounded into sight, urging on his pony with voice and hand.

"Will he know that it is a trap?" thought Chris, and he fully expected to see the man draw rein, send an arrow amongst the hiding party, and gallop off. But even as the thought ran through the lad's brain the savage reached the narrow gap and dashed through.

By this time two more were close behind, a party of four some fifty yards in the rear, all galloping hard, eager to overtake the fugitive, while as they passed through at full gallop the echoes of the hoofs increased, for a mob of about thirty came into sight, all tearing along as in a race, and passed through the gap. "Right into the trap!" thought Chris, whose pulses literally bounded with the excitement of the scene that had passed beneath his feet.

"We've got them!" he panted. "Now, father, the stones!"

But it was beneath his breath that the words came, and his face flushed and his eyes dilated, for as the echoing of the horses' hoofs began to die out behind it grew louder in front, and another troop of the enemy came into sight, tearing along after their leaders, to dash through the gap in ones and twos, trailing along till the last had disappeared.

"That must be all," panted Chris to himself; but he was wrong; the echoes of the rocky walls had not ceased, though greatly softened down, for two dozen more of the savages came tearing along like a rearguard to pass through, and even then more were to come, for a couple raced up, shouting at and beating the flanks of their ponies angrily, as if in fear of being left quite behind.

"The last!" thought Chris, now wild with excitement, for the reverberations had ceased in front, were dying out behind, and then all was still for a few moments, before out of the utter silence came the soft piping sound of a whistle.

"Hurrah!" cried Chris, for he felt that he must get

rid of the breath that literally burned in his chest as he sprang up.

Then crash, splinter, and shiver came from below as the doctor forced the first block to the edge of the shelf where the opening was most narrow.

This was almost accompanied by another shivering crash, repeated both from the walls of the gulch like so much smothered thunder.

"Now for it!" panted Chris, as he caught sight of Ned bending down to roll a great block far too big for him over and over. But the one he was himself handling was as big, and Ned, who was not ten yards away from him, laughed mockingly as he got his block to the edge first and sent it down with a crash.

But the noise made by the one sent after it by Chris formed as it were an echo, and he stood for a few moments gazing down in wonder, for huge pieces had been forced off the shelf by Wilton and Bourne, to lie gathered so closely together that already the way was blocked sufficiently to make it impossible for any horse to pass unless at a flying leap, for which there was neither take-off nor landing at the end.

"Don't shout. Don't cheer," panted the doctor. "Work steadily and well, and we shall soon have them fast."

"I hope there are no more to come and have us," panted Wilton as he slaved away, making Chris and Ned both glance excitedly away through the gulch towards where the gully struck off.

But the enemy seemed to be all within the trap, and the stones were forced down till nearly all available on the shelves had been sent thundering down, and both parties climbed some fifty feet higher before they continued the work, beginning with the highest blocks that were loose, and having the satisfaction of seeing the heaviest block there, which took two or three to move it, go roaring down, sweeping with it others nearly as big.

They worked for fully half-an-hour, to look down at last in wonder to see the great success of their work, the gap being piled high, and, leaving horses out of the question,

forming a barrier that it would be hard work for an active man to climb.

"Stop now," said the doctor, and all gladly rested, to stand wiping the perspiration from their streaming faces. "No horses can possibly pass by here."

"Mind! Quick! Down with you!" shouted Wilton, and as he spoke an arrow struck against the rocky wall close to his head and glanced off, to fly far away along the gulch.





CHAPTER LII

THE PROGRESS OF THE PLAN

A "NARROW escape," said Bourne, and another arrow passed over without injury to any one present, for the simple reason that all had obeyed the warning and dropped behind the nearest cover.

"Be on the alert," cried the doctor from the other side. "That means they are coming back."

"And Griggs was to have been with us by this time to help in the fight. Father, this looks bad."

The doctor met his son's eyes, and then turned to look in the direction from which their companion would be bound to arrive if he had managed to escape over the terraces to make for the gully.

"Don't judge rashly, my boy," said the doctor. "He has had very little time yet.—Are you all ready for the enemy?"

"Yes," came back quickly enough; but there was no enemy visible.

"Could you see who sent that arrow, Wilton?"

"No, but there are two ponies grazing up yonder. I fancy they must belong to the last Indians we saw come by."

"It looks like it, as only two shots have come. But we shall have the whole body coming back soon."

"Close upon a hundred," said Wilton, "and we are five."

"Yes, five, in a strong fortress, with modern weapons against instruments of barbarism; and what is more, we have dealt the enemy such a blow as will take them long enough to get over."

"But I wish we were all together, father, instead of being divided. Wouldn't it be better if we tried to get to them?"

"No," said the doctor quietly. "We are quite right here for the present, and perhaps we shall have our side strengthened soon by the coming of friend Griggs."

"Ah!" sighed Chris, "if he only would!"

Another arrow struck the rocks close to where Bourne and his friends were watchfully scanning the gulch between them and the old camp, and directly after a shot was fired, making every one start to look where the little grey puff of smoke arose, and Wilton was calmly reloading his rifle.

"I marked that fellow down," he said coolly.

"Did you hit?" said the doctor.

"I think so. He has altered his position, and is lying flat."

"Don't fire! A friend!" came in a familiar voice from behind them, and the boys gave a cheer, which was answered by Griggs, who now appeared, coming at a trot along the gulch from the direction of the gully, and began to climb up on the doctor's side.

"I did hope to be in time," he said, as he reached Chris and lay down, breathing hard. "Not done much, I hope?"

"You are in time," cried Chris, catching at the American's hand, to have his own pressed firmly.

"We've been in great anxiety about you, Griggs," cried the doctor, pressing his friend's other hand.

"You'd have felt worse than that, sir, if you'd seen my wig," said the American, with a chuckle. "They came so near catching me that my hair began to rise at the thought of being cut shorter than ever it was cut before, and made into an ornament. They nearly had me before I got to the first terrace. You know I—— There's a chap

yonder going to send an arrow at us, Chris, lad. You'd better shoot."

Chris followed the direction indicated by the American's pointing finger, saw where a big Indian was drawing his bow, showing only his face and arms round a corner, and drew trigger, with the result that he struck the stone and sent splinters flying, and after them the Indian, evidently hurt badly, for he held his left arm with his right hand.

"Go on, Griggs," said Chris, reloading. "You were saying, 'You know I—' and then you stopped."

"To be sure," said Griggs, whose breath was still coming in gasps, as he lay on his chest with his rifle ready now for a shot. "I was going to say, You know I can run fast."

"Yes, yes," cried Chris eagerly. "Go on."

"I did," said Griggs, "as hard as I could; but a galloping horse is too much for me, and I won't back myself against one again."

"But you got into safety," cried Chris.

"Only just. I believe I saved myself by about one inch and a half. That was enough, though, to let me shut and lock the door we had got ready."

"Did you fire?" asked the doctor.

"Fire? Never had time, sir. But there, I managed to shut up, I hope, so that the brutes couldn't follow me, and then I hurried on to join you. Tut, tut, what a cracker that is! I didn't hurry a bit. It was a regular crawl to the gully. Think me long?"

"Horribly," cried Chris.

"No wonder, my lad. It was a horrible crawl, for I was regularly done. I felt what the Amurricans call real bad. But now tell me, did the whole band come by here?"

"As far as we can tell," replied the doctor.

"That's right. I never had time to look back, but it seemed to me as if the whole Indian nation was after my scalp on horseback. They didn't get it, did they, Chris?"

"Get it? No, of course not."

"I'm glad of that; but it felt precious cold two or three

times. But now tell me—you've begun shooting—are the enemy coming on?"

"I believe we have only been attacked by a couple of stragglers—two who passed through the narrow gap here last."

"And you've filled the gap well up?"

"Oh yes. No horse could get by here."

"That's right! Then the big lot haven't found out yet that they're trapped?"

"Certainly not," said the doctor.

"Then there's going to be a big fight when they do find it out," said Griggs quietly. "I don't want them to come yet till my hand grows a bit steady, for, kill and slay or no, we've got to bring down all we can."

"I suppose so," said the doctor gravely. "It's their lives or ours."

"Yes. They'll be real mad; and we've got to give them a lesson—one that will make them shy of trying bows and arrows against rifles.—Yes, getting all right again now," continued the speaker, in answer to eager inquiries from the other side of the gap.

"That's right," said Bourne. "Lee."

"Yes?"

"What do you think of making for the ponies and mules now, before the Indians find that they're trapped?"

"May I tell him, sir?" said Griggs sharply.

"Yes, say what you think," cried the doctor.

"Look here, Mr. Bourne," said Griggs quickly; "the doctor thinks the same as I do—that it would be mad, giving ourselves up to be massacred. We've got to hold this barricade for our lives, and shoot down every man who tries to climb it. There must be no misses this time. Do you hear, boys? You're fighting for your fathers' lives as well as your own. It's no time to be sorry for the poor Indians now. Shoot your best, and leave them to be sorry for themselves.—By the way, Chris, my lad, can you give me a drink out of your water-bottle? I'm pretty well dried up. I had to fling mine away so as to run lighter, and it was getting so

close that I was very nearly sending my rifle and cartridges off as well. But I managed to bring them home.—Hah!” he continued, after a long draught from the bottle Chris handed to him. “What fine stuff water is. I think we’ve found out that, Squire Bourne, even if we haven’t found the gold.”

“Hush! Listen!” cried the doctor, and he held up his hand.

For there was a peculiar reverberation from the rocks farther on towards the rock city—a sound that thrilled the listeners through and through.

“Yes, that’s them coming, sir,” said Griggs coolly. “They’re only riding gently, though, and it doesn’t seem as if they know what’s happened to them yet. We shall see them along that curve soon. Now, doctor, will you give your orders about how we are to shoot?”

“Slowly and steadily,” replied the doctor, “and always at the leading men. Listen, Wilton; we three will fire one by one while you all hold your hands to be ready to keep on while we reload, so that they will not be able to advance without seeing their men constantly falling. There must be no excitement, always a careful, steady aim.”

“When shall we begin?” asked Wilton.

“As soon as the first man rides out into the open yonder.”

“Then it’s time to begin at once, sir,” said Wilton sharply, “for here they come.”

“Yes,” said the doctor firmly. “Keep well in cover, every one. Wait till I give the word. I want the leaders to see that the way is barred against their retreat.”

“They’re beginning to see it already,” said Griggs, as about twenty of the Indians rode round the curve into sight, and their quick eyes grasped the fact at once that something had happened at the gap since they passed by.

“Look out! ’Ware arrows,” said Griggs, in a low, deep growl. “Tell ’em, doctor, that they needn’t mind those plaything toys so long as they keep well under cover.”

“We can hear what you say,” said Bourne, and an

anxious half-minute passed, before there was a sudden yell, sounding wild and harsh, to echo and re-echo from the mighty walls on either side, while as it went reverberating on from side to side, to die away in the distance, there was another shout, and close upon it the whizz of a flight of arrows, and then a tinkling, splintering sound as they struck against the stones, to snap or glance off, the air just about the barrier seeming for a moment full of the glistening barbed wands.

"Fire!" said the doctor loudly, and *crack—crack—crack* with measured slowness the rifles of all three rang out, to raise a fresh set of echoes, and as these were still repeating themselves another and a fiercer yell rang out, for three of the mounted men had gone down and their horses had dashed forward, charging right at the barrier, snorting and tossing their manes, but only to turn back, startled by the heap of rocks piled up before them, and returned at a fierce gallop, to confuse the crowd they had left, when the rifles from the other side flashed out fire and white puffs of smoke, and three more of the enemy went down, to free their startled and plunging ponies from their riders' reins.

A yell more fierce than ever arose from the little crowd of Indians, whose mounts began to partake of the excitement imparted by the ponies that had begun to tear to and fro in the narrow gulch, while after discharging another innocuous flight of arrows against the barrier of stones, about a dozen of the savages came on, yelling and belabouring their mounts, driving them nearly frantic as they urged them forward.

The riders were evidently imbued with a mad belief that their half-wild steeds would surmount the barrier by leaps and climbing, as after a short wild career they were forced right at the rugged mass of stones. Fully half breasted it, some to fall, others to wrench themselves round, while others again flung their riders, to gallop back snorting with excitement, as they returned to dash into the halting mob they had left and add fresh confusion there.

They were exciting moments at the barrier. One Indian pitched upon his head to lie senseless, but three more regained their feet, tore their knives from their belts, and placing them between their teeth to leave their hands free, began to climb up the slope of rough jagged stones to take vengeance upon the whites who had dared to oppose their attack. But not one of them reached the top of the hurled-down masses of rock, which were, after all, not half-way up to where the little party crouched, patient, cool, and watchful, as they obeyed their leader's orders not to waste a shot.

The result of the desperate attack was that one man stopped short, tottered, and fell back, to roll over to the bottom and then begin to crawl slowly back, leaving his comrades motionless where they had fallen.

There was a few moments' pause as the one man crept painfully back, and then about a dozen of the Indians dismounted and joined in driving the frantic ponies that were galloping about through an opening made for them by the waiting band.

This done the party remounted, and set up another furious yell to frighten the defenders from their posts.

Needless to say, this was as vain as the next and larger flight of arrows, which splintered amongst the stones or glanced off to fly far overhead.

There was no firing now by the defenders, for the need was not urgent.

"Let them exhaust themselves," cried the doctor, "and find out that their efforts are vain."

Still there was no lack of bravery amongst the savages, who, some twenty strong, being as many as could act in the narrow gully, charged home again, directly after sending in their arrows, and accompanying the beating of their ponies' hoofs with yell after yell.

This time there was no waiting on the part of the defenders, who began firing as soon as the advance commenced, with the result that several Indians dropped, to encumber the way and unsettle the serried band of plunging steeds, while the rest, on breasting the rocks, recoiled,

and in a state of panic turned, regardless of yells and blows, to gallop back after the fashion of their kind, crowding together till they reached their fellows once again, to stand shivering, snorting, and stamping, but leaving two struggling in the bottom of the gulch in company with six of their riders, wounded or dead.

"That ought to settle them," said Wilton, who knelt carefully wiping his rifle.

"I hope so," said Bourne. "I'm tired of this murderous work."

"'Tis bad, sir," said Griggs, from the other side; "but it rests with the redskins."

"Do you think they will give up now, Griggs?" said the doctor.

"No, sir; I don't," was the reply.

"Oh, Griggs, you're making the worst of it," cried Chris.

"No, my lad, I'm not. It's of no use for me to talk nonsense. I know too much of Indian nature. All they're thinking of now is how to get at us, and have revenge for what we have done."

"Then you think they will attack again?"

"Sure to, sir," replied Griggs; "but perhaps not with a rush. If they don't, they'll wait till it's dark, and then leave their horses behind and come on with their knives."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Chris. "That will be bad for us."

"Horrid," said Griggs coolly. "It seems—— Hallo! They're coming on again. Give 'em a volley, sir, this time."

"Yes," cried the doctor eagerly, as he saw at a glance that the Indians were gathering for another rush. "Hold your fire," he cried loudly, "till they are three parts of the way here, and then all together. I'll give the word."

"But suppose they come on, dismount, and attack afterwards," said Chris.

"You have the second barrels," said the doctor. "Be ready. Here they come."

For once more the savages were putting their regular tactics to the test, coming on yelling and waving their weapons, using them to frighten their foes as much as to

madden their ponies into a furious gallop, and this right in the rear of another flight of arrows, half of which came from the Indians who remained behind for want of room.

To the boys this was the most exciting charge of all, for during the others they had something to do or see, as the firing was kept up almost from the first. Here they had to wait—only for moments, it is true, but moments which seemed like minutes, and during which they had no gathering smoke to hide the gleaming teeth, flashing eyes, and savage hate depicted in the red and painted faces coming swiftly on.

“Fire!” shouted the doctor, his voice sounding sharp and clear above the rattle of hoofs, the yells of the savages, and the reverberations from the rocky sides of the gulch.

Every finger pressed the trigger at the same moment; there was a flash, six jets of grey smoke driven full in the faces of the on-coming ponies, and then one great crack, followed by a deafening roar, which combination checked the ponies as if by magic, making them rear up, dismounting several of their riders. Then they all tore back, leaving eight or nine Indians scrambling to their feet, to run after their steeds, others lying struggling among the stones, and, plain to see, two more tottering upon their ponies’ backs, one falling forward to cling to his mount’s neck, another to sink backward and drop off, and another to wrench himself round and shake his bow at the occupants of the barrier in impotent fury, before throwing up his hands and lying back clinging to his seat till his pony had plunged into the little crowd waiting their return.

“The most effective action yet,” said the doctor hoarsely, as the reloading ended.

“Yes, sir, I think that’s best,” responded Griggs.

“But such a sickening slaughter of the poor ignorant wretches,” cried Bourne bitterly.

“That’s what I used to think when I was first up in the Rockies, sir,” said Griggs coolly, “till I had been about a bit, and seen where the redskins up there had been amongst the settlers’ ranches. Pleasant homes burned

down, and men, women, and children lying where they had been murdered and cut about—people who had been living hopeful lives, hard workers whose only crime against the Indians was trying to get a living out of a few acres instead of by hunting and war. I used to feel just as you do, Mr. Bourne; but I don't now."

"I know, I know," cried Ned's father passionately; "but they are so ignorant of our power."

"Yes, sir, but we're not of theirs," replied Griggs. "Now, doctor, they're drawing off. Had enough of it for one day, and it's time to be stirring."

"What, retreat?"

"Not yet, sir. Here's my idea. They'll wait till it's dark, attack us then with knives and tomahawks, coming on silently, leaving their horses behind, and we shan't have a chance."

"Then what do you propose?" said the doctor.

"Just this, sir, if you can't see a better way. We three stop here, ready to have a shot at any Indian who shows himself, while Mr. Bourne, young squire, and Chris go off to the mules and horses."

"No," cried Chris; "I'm not going to leave my father."

"Wait, my boy," said the doctor sternly.

"But, father——"

"Silence, sir!"

"Hadn't done speaking, my lad," said Griggs, looking at the boy with a smile. "Here's the rest of it. Mr. Bourne and Squire Ned get old Skeeter to the front; and set off at once as fast as the mules will go, which only means a walk."

"But where—where?" cried Bourne excitedly.

"Anywhere, sir, except into the soda-plains. The thing you've got to do is to put as many miles between you and here as you can manage in the next twenty-four hours."

"What, and desert you?" cried Bourne. "How are you going to manage to find us?"

"Oh, I'll find you by your trail when the time comes, sir," said Griggs, laughing. "Don't you be afraid of that. Don't even think about it, only of getting right away."

"I see," said the doctor, and he frowned down Chris, who was about to speak. "Now go on."

"There's not much more to say, sir. We shall stay here till dusk, giving the redskins a reminder now and then that we're on the alert; and at last, when we feel that they're coming on for the attack, into the saddles we jump, and steal off till we're out of hearing, and then crawl till we make sure of the trail of the mules, and then gallop."

"But the ponies will have gone with the mules," cried Chris excitedly.

"You'd better not let them," said Griggs, with a grim smile at the boy. "You've got to see the train started well on its way from the bottom of the gully, and then bring the horses here—all six, mind."

"Yes, I see," said Chris, brightening up, the sun seeming to come out on his gloomy, powder-smirched face. "But what about Ned's and Mr. Bourne's ponies?"

"They'll have to be contented with mules. They've only got to walk, and there are several now with half loads. We shall want their ponies for spare mounts, so as to give the others a rest now and then, for when we leave here we shall have to make the best of our way."

"Oh!" cried Chris joyously. "I wish I were as clever as you are, Griggs."

"It's all right, my lad," said the American grimly; "don't be in a hurry. I've learned a bit about the Indians, and you've got that to begin with; by the time you get as old as I am you'll have picked up a deal more than I know, and you will not think much of me then. Now, doctor, what's your idea?"

"Yours, Griggs," cried the gentleman addressed. "It cannot be bettered. You hear, Bourne?"

"Yes, I hear," was the reply; "but about the Indians. You will not escape them; they'll follow your trail."

"A bit," said Griggs, "while they're hot and wild after finding out that we've tricked them and gone; but I seem to think that they won't tramp far and leave their mustangs shut up in the valley. They'll come back to get

them out, and that will take them days, even if they do it then; while if they can catch us after giving us about a week's law, I shall feel disposed to forgive them."

"We need not discuss the matter further, eh, Wilton?" said the doctor, turning to the young man, who had crouched close by, watching the spot where the Indians had disappeared.

"No. It's all cut and dried," said the young man quietly. "Be off, Bourne; you're going to have the best of it."

"That father isn't," said Ned sharply. "I don't think it's fair. Let Chris go. I want to stop and fight."

"Nay, nay, nay," said Griggs, smiling; "don't be greedy, lad. You've killed quite as many redskins to-day as is good for you. Be satisfied. I dare say we can contrive a bit more fighting for you by and by."

"He may have all my share," said Chris, screwing up his face. "I hate it. It's horrible."

"Obey orders," said the doctor, smiling. "Bourne, will you get off at once?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"And you, boys. I don't think any eyes can reach us, for we get no more arrows now; but all the same, I would not show. Crawl down to the bottom; you will be safe from all observation there, and you can rise and walk as soon as you are past the first curve. Till we meet again."

"Till we meet again," said Bourne and Ned in a breath, and they began to crawl down the far side of the gulch from where they had made their defence.

"As for you, my boy," continued the doctor, "you will bring the ponies down, following the mules, and coming to a halt at that spring by the big needle-like stone. There's some browsing for them there."

"Am I to stay with them, father?" said Chris.

"Of course, my boy, to be ready for starting at a moment's notice."

"But if you have to fight again?"

"We three will do our best."

"But only three, father?"

“Only three, but three men fighting with a knowledge that if things go against them they have ponies waiting for them, ready for a retreat. Now, my boy. Duty. Be off. And mind, you’ll take no notice of a few shots.”

Chris made no reply. His rifle was already slung, and after one glance up the gulch towards the valley, without seeing a sign of the enemy, he began to back down the slope, creeping and crawling till it was safe to rise, and then hurrying after Bourne and Ned, overtaking them long before they could reach the entrance to the steep slope of the gully.





CHAPTER LIII

A BIT OF BLUE SKY

THE task of getting the mules together was simple enough, the irritable beasts making their usual objections, but following their old leader Skeeter quietly enough in spite of the bell not being in use; and in a short time they were trudging along with their loads down the steep slope till the gulch was reached, and Chris came after them with the ponies, to bring his charge to a halt.

"Like to change places, Ned?" he said archly.

"No; I'm going to do my part without that."

"Good-bye, Chris, my lad," said Bourne sadly. "I don't like going off and leaving you."

"And I don't like you to go, Mr. Bourne," said Chris, holding out his hand, which was warmly grasped. "Take care of yourself, Ned."

"Yes; and you," said the boy sadly.

The next minute Chris was standing by his mustang's head, watching the mules file away.

"Look at that," said Chris, as he noted that his charge displayed no desire to follow the mules. "Why, if that old Skeeter isn't actually sneering at my ponies! He deserves to be kicked for his conceit."

Ned turned to wave his hand just before a bend in the gulch hid the mule-train from sight, and then Chris mounted and rode towards the pointed rock close to which

the spring gurgled out of the rock. Here he took the precaution of drinking deeply himself before letting the ponies have their fill of the refreshing water, after which they began grazing in their quiet, inoffensive way, leaving their guardian to his thoughts, which were many and troubled.

In the full expectation of hearing shots, Chris spent plenty of time in listening; but no reports reached his ears, and he began thinking of the change from the wild excitement and risk of his position by the barrier a short time before, to the silence and grandeur of the deeply-cut rift in which he now stood. For gloomy and forbidding as the place looked by night, even awful in its black solemnity, it was striking enough now in its effects of brilliant sunshine and shade to make the boy think it was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen in his life.

"What a pity!" he muttered, as he listened to the *crop*, *crop* of the ponies.

He did not say what was a pity, for the sharp crack of a rifle brought him out of his musings to gaze sharply in the direction of the barrier, far away from where he was waiting, and wondering now whether there was any more fighting on the way.

Another sharp crack, and Chris's excitement increased, as he first looked anxiously at his charges to see if they were startled by the firing.

But the ponies did not even lift their heads, but went on browsing upon the green shoots near the spring, while the boy involuntarily dragged his rifle round, ready to throw the sling over his head if the need sprang up for its use.

But there was evidently no immediate danger, for quite an hour passed before there was another shot fired to raise the echoes, and this proved to be single.

A longer period elapsed before anything more occurred, and twice as long a time passed before there was another.

"It's just as they said," thought Chris—"a shot or two, just to show the redskins that we're on the alert."

It was about this time that Chris fancied that the faintness from which he suffered was due to the want of food, and opening his wallet he took out a piece of damper, to find that it ate very sweet with nothing but a few handfuls of water to wash it down.

By the time this was finished the sun had sunk far below the rocks on his left, and the dreamy, restful state into which the boy had been falling passed away. For the thoughts that came fast now were beginning to grow troublous. It would not be long before it was night, and with the darkness an exciting time would arrive. Chris thought that the Indians would not wait long before they attacked, and a great anxiety now oppressed him. Would his father think of this and be prepared, or would he wait too long, and then——

It was too horrible to think of. Chris all through that afternoon had been suffering from the effect of his exertions, and had sunk into a restful state a long way on to the border which divides wakefulness from sleep; but with the coming of darkness his brain had become active to a painful degree, and but for the stringent orders he had received to be prepared and wait with the ponies, he would have gone forward, sought his father, and told him of his fears.

“He’s sure to know better than I do,” cried the boy at last, to comfort himself, but with very poor effect, as he kept his watch till the darkness had seemed to settle down like a flood in the gulch, the ponies had become invisible, and the sky had turned to a dark purple with a few stars dotting it here and there.

Half-an-hour now passed, and then the boy’s agonized tension was broken by three shots ringing out almost together.

“A volley!” he said aloud, and the words had hardly passed his lips before there was a repetition of the reports.

“The other three barrels!” he cried excitedly, and then, speaking as if those of whom he thought were close at hand, “Load, load, load!” he panted. “Oh, quick, quick! They’re coming on!”

He waited again, but there was not a sound, and half-an-hour seemed to have passed, during which his busy brain invented a host of horrors, chief among which was that in which he pictured to himself the Indians stealing up to the defenders of the barrier, knife in hand, to spring upon them and massacre all before they could fire another shot in their defence.

So horrible became the silence at last that Chris felt that if it lasted much longer he must mount his mustang and ride forward to learn the worst.

"Even if they kill me," he muttered, and he mentally saw himself falling beneath the enemy's blows.

But in response to a desperate effort to recall his duty those thoughts grew dull and distant, and straining his eyes to gaze into the darkness he obeyed a sudden impulse to slip the ponies' bridles into their mouths, fasten a strap or two, and then tighten the saddle-girths, the animals submitting patiently enough, and allowing themselves to be placed in readiness for a start.

"I can't do anything more," he said to himself. "Oh, how terribly dark!"

Pst! from close at hand, so close to him that the boy started as if he had been stung.

"Father!" he whispered.

"Good lad. Not a word. Are the ponies saddled and bridled?"

"Yes, father."

"Right. Now, Griggs—Wilton; take two each, and lead on. Walk with them for the present, and as quietly as you can go. We'll follow close behind."

No further words were spoken, but there was the sound of hoofs passing over the stony bottom of the gulch, and the next minute Chris and his father, each leading his pony, were walking together side by side, the animals stepping instinctively in the footprints of those in front, and, saving for the faint sound of tramping, the silence seemed to the boy perfectly awful.

At last Chris could keep back a question no longer.

"The firing, father—I heard two volleys. Were the savages coming on?"

"No, but we treated them as if they were, just to show them that we were waiting for an attack, and then came on to join you at once. Now, no more talking; I want to listen till they announce that they are there."

"Will they?" whispered Chris.

"They'll either attack with one of their savage yells, or else give one in their rage when they find that we are gone. That will be the signal for us to mount and ride for our lives. Indians are swift of foot, boy."

It seemed an hour, during which every ear was on the strain, but probably it was not a fourth of that time, before the fierce yell of the savages was heard; but it only reached the fugitives as a faint whisper, followed by another.

Fortunately the retiring party had reached where the gulch had opened out, and quite a broad band of brilliant stars was spread overhead from rock-wall to rock-wall, giving sufficient light for the ponies to follow one another in Indian file at a good round trot, which was kept up hour after hour, with intervals of walking and the indulgence now in a little conversation regarding the distance ahead of the mule-train or the possibility of its being missed.

But Griggs was positive.

"No," he said, "we can't have over-run them."

"But have they turned off somewhere? I don't remember any side valley, but we may have passed one."

"No, we mayn't, sir," said Griggs coolly. "We don't know it—at least, I don't suppose you did, for I fancy I do—but if the mules had turned off anywhere our clever mustangs would have done the same. They've been following the mules' trail ever since we started."

"What! Impossible in this darkness."

"Think so, sir? Well, suppose you wait and see."

There was silence for awhile, before the doctor rode to the front again to where Chris was now beside Griggs.

"We have heard nothing of the enemy," he said.

"No, sir. I've listened till it has given me a feeling like toothache."

"Do you think they are on our trail?"

"Ah, there I can't say anything, sir, only that they may be. But if they are they're coming on at a regular crawl; I am sure of that."

"How can you be sure?" said the doctor wonderingly.

"Because they'll be, as Indians mostly are when they can't see their quarry, horribly suspicious of being led into an ambush."

"They did not seem so when they followed you."

"No; they could see me, and they forgot to be in doubt in the heat of the pursuit. But on a night like this, and after the way in which we have shot them down, they are bound to feel their way step by step if they follow at all. Most likely they'll wait till morning, when they'll pick up our trail."

"And then?"

"Come on as fast as they can run, sir. They won't ride."

Griggs finished off with a loud chuckle. "Say, Chris," he added, "won't they be mad at not being able to get out their ponies!"

"I suppose so," said Chris.

"But there's a good side to everything. It'll be grand for the poor beasts. They're ridden nearly to death; now they'll have a good rest with plenty of fine pasture."

"But about to-morrow, Griggs?" said Chris.

"What about to-morrow?"

"The Indians may follow us and overtake us on foot."

"Well, if they do, they do, my lad, and at the very worst they may capture some of our stores. But perhaps not. I don't like being a brute to a dumb beast, but if I'm driven to it I may have to be a bit hard to some of those mules. They can go so fast that no Indian can catch them—if they like."

"Yes?"

"Well, as a rule they don't like."

"That's the worst of it," said Chris.

"Yes, but this time they've got to like; and I know how to make them."

Daybreak at last, and with that dawn all doubts about the mule-convoy were at an end, for the first streaks of dawn showed them about a mile ahead, trudging steadily along, while no broadening of the day, not even the rising of the sun, revealed that for which a most anxious look-out was kept, namely, so many dark dots to indicate that the Indians were on their trail.

"I say they won't come now," said Griggs decisively. "We'll halt, sir, at the first water, and have a good rest and feed."

"Will it be safe?" said the doctor.

"We must chance that, sir, for the sake of making horse, mule, man and boy fit for what more he has to do."

"Well, perhaps so."

"It won't be losing time, and the mules and horses have done a good spell of work."





CHAPTER LIV

ONWARD

WHETHER the Indians followed up their trail the peril finders never knew, for they saw no more of that tribe, and wandered on for days in safety, passing into a new tract of country which Griggs hailed with delight.

"It's not goldy land," he said, pointing, "but a place where we can do a deal of hunting and lay up stores—dried meat for stock—before we enter the mountains yonder."

"Why do you say that?" asked Ned. "Because of those old bleached bones?"

"Yes: buffalo. That means going on for months. Once we hit upon the tail-end of a drove we can hang on to them as long as we like, and head them in towards the mountains and forest land yonder. There's a peak there that looks very like the one we want to find."

But the weeks went on, during which the bison-drove was found, and supplied the party with all the meat they needed, and sport besides, at the long gaunt wolves always on the look-out for the weakly calves. There was sport too with the bears, and a narrow escape for the doctor from a grizzly which overtook and clawed him from his pony's back, the end seeming very near. But Chris Lee's rifle-bullet was quicker than the huge bear, whose skin

when sun-dried became the doctor's bed by night when it was hot, his cover when it was cold.

Then the great peak, reached at last, gave the adventurers a wondrous view all round, but not of the golden city, which always seemed to be farther off, while none of the peaks they found accorded with the old prospector's map.

But as the time glided on adventures were always at hand. Another strange rock city was discovered, evidently inhabited at a later date, for here the old dwellers' domestic implements were plentiful in the cell-like homes cut in the terraces of cliff or cañon. Great earthen hand-made pots that had evidently held some kind of grain, flint-heads for arrows, and those of larger size which might have been used for spears.

And so the journeying went on, with times when Indians surprised the party and were driven off, while others again that were found by a rushing river proved friendly and willing to show the strange white people how it was possible to get mule-loads of a kind of salmon in a day from the rushing waters for present eating, and for splitting open and drying in the sun.

Then bison again—another salmon-river—a narrow escape from a horrible death by thirst once more—encounters with rattlesnakes—the discovery in a great open plain of the cause of a distant roaring sound like water, just at a time when it was once more wanted most. And there it was where they could look down, Tantalus-like, from the brink of a vast crack in the level plain and see a vast river foaming along half-a-mile below them, never to be reached.

And then a year had passed, and the second began, as full of adventure and excitement as ever. But by this time, while still pursuing the phantom gold, they had learned by experience the value of keeping near salmon-river and verdant rolling plain where bison were still plentiful, and the adventurers' larder was always well supplied.

They led the life of the Indians of the plain, save that

the finding of the golden city and temple was always kept in mind.

Twice over Griggs declared that though they had not found it they had discovered the high-road which led directly there. It was a watery way between perpendicular cliffs, and the place had been hailed for its promise of salmon, which they shot and speared as they glided in shoals over the yellow sands.

It was after scooping a wounded fish from the swift waters that Chris afterwards took the tin hanging from his belt and stood knee-deep to fill the vessel with the clear cold water fresh from the mountains.

"Hand me a tinfu!" cried Ned, who stood aloof so as not to wet his buffalo-skin boots.

It was boy-like. Chris filled the tin, and giving Griggs a merry look, scooped it half full of sand as well.

"I say, it feels precious heavy," cried Ned, as he raised it to his lips. "Yah!" he shouted, and he was about to toss the contents back over the giver, but Griggs caught him by the arm.

"I'll drink that," he said; "I'm not afraid of a little sand."

He drank till the sand touched his lips, and then held it in the sunshine, looking into the tin, stooped and refilled it, and rinsed it round, to pour away a mixture of sand and water, refilled again, and repeated and repeated till nearly all the sand had gone; and then he held out the cup in triumph, for the others to see a few glistening pieces of yellow metal about as big as small, smooth, flattened shot.

"Gold!" he cried. "Now then, all we have to do is to follow up this river into the mountains. The golden city is there."

And they followed that river for weeks, living upon the salmon, and washing for gold from time to time, and rarely without finding a few tiny nuggets, while the river grew more narrow, more rugged, more difficult of access, and drove them at last into cutting off curves and windings in the vast plain through which it flowed.

But the golden city was not there, nor anywhere else in their wanderings, which at last from sheer necessity in the way of supplies drew near an end.

But the journey was not yet over, for, to the surprise of all, they dropped one day upon a large settlement, with stores and all the necessaries required by civilized man.

Here they rested and recouped for a month, exciting no surprise, for prospectors were common objects there. Neither did their departure, after they had purchased all they needed, excite remark, for men came from the mountains to buy powder and blankets, and wandered off again in parties, generally with mules to bear their loads.

It was like getting out of prison to be far away in the wilds again, the boys said; and then the search went on week after week, month after month, always in vain; but despair and disappointment never cast a shadow over their little camp, for it was a delightful, healthy, exciting life, with every day bringing something new, and the golden city appearing generally in the distance after their most tiring days, when they had eaten, drunk of the crystal waters, and rolled themselves in their blankets to sleep.

It was then that the golden city came, bright and tempting, the visions of their dreams always luring them on when they rose refreshed by their rest in the clear air of the mountain or the plain.

"Oh, we're going to do it yet," Griggs would say merrily; and then they tramped to rest their ponies, and galloped when there was game afoot, and the time went on—and on—and on.





CHAPTER LV

THE OLD HOUSE AT HOME

THE little mule-train, very lightly laden, and with harness, pack-saddles, and loads looking ragged, patched, sun-bleached, and repaired in every conceivable way, moved slowly along through the rich greenery, led and followed by its sun-tanned escort, three before and three behind. The ponies looked in admirable condition save that a change of diet seemed necessary to do away with a swollen-out aspect due to constant feeding upon green-stuff instead of corn. But the saddles and bridles were as bad as those of the mules, though every bit and buckle glistened in the sunshine through constant rubbing with sand. The less said about the patched garments of the escort the better. But there were no rags. Patches of divers materials, principally furry skins, were plentiful, and the moccasins which had taken the place of boots were either Indian and very neat, or home-made and quite the reverse.

But here too there was something worthy of remark—each man's weapons were admirably cared for and ready for instant use, while the occupants of the saddles, though horribly dilapidated in the way of clothes, were also in that grand state of vigorous health which also made them appear ready for immediate use in any way, from hunting or shooting to obtain the day's provision, to fighting for

dear life against the enemies of the white men who roamed the plains.

Not that these six wanderers could fairly be called white, for the sun had burned them to a dull brick-red; but the term men is advisedly used, for though when the party last passed that way, going in the opposite direction, they were made up of four hale vigorous men and two boys, the latter had been left in the desert lands through which they had been wandering for two years—left, that is to say, by degrees, every bit that had been boyish having physically died out, for its place to be taken by something more manly, till on this particular day they rode back with their feet much nearer the ground and their sturdy mustangs appearing stunted, though quite well able to carry a far heavier load than had been in the habit of climbing into the saddles when they started from the plantations at the above-named distance of time.

It was only about a couple of hours before, when the party left the shelter of a patch of great spruce firs where they had camped for the night, that the doctor had made a remark to Bourne, and then both had stared hard at Chris and Ned, a proceeding which brought the blood into the young men's faces and made Chris ask what they saw to laugh at.

"You," said the doctor. "Why, when we rode away on our search you looked a mere boy; you are coming back to the old home both of you men grown, if you weren't so lathy and thin."

"Nobody will know them, eh, Wilton?"

"That's for certain. They will grin at you."

"I wouldn't advise them to," said Griggs slowly. "Chris has grown very hot and peppery, and Ned here has done so much fighting that he always seems to be, as the Irish say, spoiling for another go in. So they'd better not laugh, for we want to settle down again as friends."

They had been journeying on since then, getting nearer and nearer to the old settlement; but the change seemed wonderful, and they talked it over.

"Why," said the doctor, "it isn't only the boys that have grown, but everything here."

"Yes, wonderfully," said Bourne; "overgrown, one ought to say."

"They don't seem to have used the tracks much," put in Griggs. "It's hard work to make sure whether we're going right."

"Oh, we're going right enough," said Chris. "I remember every hill and dale. Look yonder; that's where the plantations are. But how they have altered!"

"Yes," said the doctor, "the place does seem changed; but from the state of the tracks I'm afraid that very little has been done in the way of developing the fruit trade. Hullo! Why are you turning off here, boys?"

"Because it was just under those big fir-trees, father, that we took and buried that poor old prospector. Ned and I want to see the board we cut and nailed on the biggest trunk."

"To be sure, yes," said Bourne; "let's go and see."

The mules were halted, and began to graze, while the party rode through the lush saplings and bushes that had sprung up so that it was hard work to get through, till they passed under the spreading branches of the trees, where the undergrowth became thin and sparse.

"There's the old board," cried Chris suddenly, and the party drew rein at last by the side of the heaped-up pile of stones with which they had marked the wanderer's grave.

No one spoke for a few minutes, but they sat there thinking deeply of the old man's coming, his death, and his legacy to the doctor, who broke the silence at length with a bitter sigh.

"Poor old dreamer!" he said sadly. "You bequeathed us your imagination, and sent us off on our quest for the phantom gold."

"Yes," said Bourne; "we'd better have left him his legacy and gone on home to the old country."

"Oh, I don't know," said Wilton. "We've had a grand time of travel and adventure, eh, boys?"

"Splendid!" came in a breath. "I'm only sorry that we've come back."

"Yes," added Chris. "You'll think that over, father, about rigging up another expedition and making a fresh trial?"

"We shall see," said the doctor thoughtfully; "we shall see. What do you say, Griggs, about another search for the golden city?"

"Well, I dunno," said Griggs slowly. "Maybe I'll wait a year before I decide one way or the other."

"Griggs!" cried the two lads together.

"Oh, you needn't shout," said the American. "I've been thinking over it a deal, more'n you have, p'r'aps, and it seems to me that even if we had found the old place marked down on that old Rip Van Winkle map we should have had a deal of trouble to carry back enough gold to have made the journey worth while."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the two young men uproariously. "There's an old fox. He has just found out that the grapes are sour."

"Well, so they have been, boys," cried the American. "But talk about grapes, it's just five years since I planted some fine young vines in my patch and against the shanty. I wonder whether the blights have let them grow. My word, I should like a few bunches now!"

"I'm afraid they'll be as sour as the gold, Griggs," said the doctor. "There, let's ride on and leave the poor old fellow to sleep in peace. He took his secret with him, for his map was too vague for us to find his city of golden dreams. We have spent two years over the search, but we have travelled well over an unknown land and come back, I hope, wiser and more ready to do battle with the world."

"Oh, we shall try again, father," cried Chris, "and get real gold yet, not phantom gold, as you call it. *Nil desperandum*, you know. Never say die."

"Try again!" cried Ned.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast," said Bourne gravely.

"Better luck next time," cried Wilton.

"Say, gentlemen," said Griggs dryly, "it don't seem to me a suitable time for you to be firing off your copy-book maxims all over the place when it's getting on for dinner-hour. I want to progress and ride on to the old plantations to see which of our old friends is going to win in the fight to have us for guests and give us a good sitting-down square meal."

"There's wisdom," cried Chris merrily. "Griggs is always right. Forward!"

He led the way from beneath the spreading boughs of the great spruce, out from the solemn gloom where the old prospector lay and into the glorious sunshine of the luxuriant, verdant country, which seemed a very Eden after the parching sandy alkali deserts and the rocky tracts. The mules and ponies kept on snatching at a mouthful here and a mouthful there, as if it were too rich and tempting to be passed; but in spite of the loveliness of all around, the adventurers became more and more impressed by a something desolate about the attractive district over which they passed. The hills and dales were glorious, but somehow they came upon no signs of cultivation, nor yet of settlements, till at last, with a feeling of sinking that was not all due to hunger, they rode right into the very centre of the cluster of plantations they had left two years before on their search for the golden city, to find on their return wherever they went traces of a fire here, completely over-run with greenery, there the remains of a shed or shanty with trees and vines dislodging the props and boards; and though they hailed and whistled it was only to scare birds or squirrels, and to awake no answering call.

They rode a little here and a little there, the ponies pushing their way through the tremendous growth; but it was all the same. Shanty after shanty was in ruins where it could be traced, but desertion everywhere.

But during the search, moved by a strange feeling of opposition, the friends shrank from approaching the dense grove which hid the home they had left. They all

shared the feeling that it would be too painful to look upon the traces of the fire that without doubt had levelled with the soil the house they had toiled over, and it was not until Griggs spoke that something like a spell which had hung over them was driven away.

"Seems to me," he said, "that when the fellows burned or carried off all their stuff they made a pretty clean sweep. I'm just going across now to have a look at my old spot; but I don't suppose there'll be any dinner waiting there. Won't you have a look at your old roost first?"

"Yes," said the doctor, making an effort. "I couldn't go in yonder before. Chris, boy, there's no one to blame but ourselves; we deserted the old place; but it seemed to be hard to bear. Let's look at the ruins, if there are any left."

They forced their way through a dense grove of fruit-trees and wild growth which towered above the plantings of the past, the ponies breaking down the lush vines and succulent canes, till they were brought up suddenly by something solid which was overgrown by a vine.

"What!" cried the doctor.

"Ahoy! Griggy!" roared Chris through his hands. "Ahoy! Hooray! Here's one of our vines loaded and breaking down with grapes."

The next minute the American and his companions had forced their way up to the front of the big shanty and its shed—the barracks, as they had termed it—to find that their fellow-settlers had respected the nailed-up doors and shutters, leaving at their exodus the unlucky district just as it had been at the peril finders' departure; but Nature had been hard at work for her part, toiling as she toils in a rich country to destroy man's work and restore all to its pristine state.

But though vines had draped, and shoots had dislodged shingles, the stoutly-nailed walls stood firm. No firebrand had been set to the sawn-up wood, and after some work with an axe to wrench away the boards that had been nailed over window-shutter and door, there was the old

place fairly intact, with the utensils just as they had been left.

The consequence was that the wanderers, after seeing to their weary beasts and leaving them grazing in the midst of abundance, made their own dinner seated at the rough table, drinking the water from the swift river hard by, and finding, half smothered by the competing growth, abundance of peaches and Bartlett pears to supplement the grapes ripening on the roof of the old home.

"I say, Chris," said Ned, with his mouth full, or nearly so, of juicy pear, "is this all a dream?"

"My peach tastes just like a real one," was the reply. "But I say, father, the fruit never used to grow like this."

"No, my boy," said the doctor; "I feel half stunned in my surprise. A complete change seems to have come over everything. The weeds and wild things have run rampant, but the fruit-trees, such as I can see, all look clean and free from blight."

"Say, neighbour," cried Griggs, "I'm going over to my place now, if some one else will help at the clearance. These grapes, you know."

"They're splendid," said the doctor. "What about them?"

"Why, this," said Griggs; "I planted lots, and they'd never grow any more than my oranges would."

"Oranges!" cried Chris. "Here, father, we haven't looked at our grove."

"Come on with me, then," said Griggs, "and we'll take it on the way. I want to see mine too. As to the grapes, if yours'll grow like this so ought mine; and if they have—— But wait a bit."

All mounted again, to make their mustangs breast their way in the direction of the dried-up peach and orange-grove which they had toiled over in despair, and at the first glance a shout of delight arose.

"Why, father," cried Chris, "what was the good of going there through thirst and starvation to find phantom gold when it is glowing and growing, and breaking down the branches here?"

For it was a golden sight indeed for weary, longing and disappointed eyes.

Progress was difficult after they had literally gloated over the beauty and promise of the orange-grove, for the tracks were wonderfully grown over, everything showing that the settlement must have been forsaken almost directly after the departure of the adventurers. Then Griggs' plantation was reached and found to be as full of promise as that which they had so lately quitted; and this proved to be the case wherever they rode, for the change everywhere was complete, the crops, as far as the encroaching wildings would allow, being abundant, but not a hand left to gather, those whom the party had known having forsaken the place to a man.

The rest of the day was devoted to cleaning and making the old home suitable for temporary if not for permanent habitation. Creeper and vine had to be cut back, so as to admit light and clear the choked-up chimney, while with the growth endless intruders, insect, reptile, and bird, were banished. The remaining stores, now very low, were brought in, and what all declared to be a very jovial supper prepared and most thoroughly enjoyed.

"One never knows what a day will bring forth," cried Bourne, smiling upon his listeners. "Here we were this morning weary and despondent, looking forward to someone taking us in to-night by way of charity, while now we find that we have fallen on our feet, and are quite at home in the midst of abundance."

"Yes," said Wilton; "I've seen enough to prove that Nature has retaken possession here, and that an hour with a gun will give us all we want to-morrow in the way of game."

"Yes," cried Chris; "and look there, Ned—fish."

"What about them?"

"The river's full, and I saw plenty leaping, waiting for rod and line or net."

"That's good," cried Ned.

"Oh yes; we shan't starve," said Griggs. "But let's see, how far used we to be from the other settlement?"

"Forty miles," replied the doctor.

"But suppose that is deserted, the same as this?"

"Then we shall be quite a hundred from the next."

"A hundred," said Griggs dryly. "Well, that seems horribly close and crowding one up like after living as we've been lately. It seems to me that if we liked to stop here now we might have the pick of the whole place, and as many patches as we like to take up."

"What about the old owners?" said Bourne.

"They've thrown up the game and gone—back to England, perhaps. I don't believe any one is ever likely to put in claims, but we could soon get that settled by the State law. I've nearly made up my mind to start afresh, doctor. You see, everything is going to be quite different; but there's one thing I can't understand. Climates don't change all at once, but here's this place boiling over, as one might say, with plenty now, while a few years ago we were only able to grow enough to feed the insects and blight. How do you account for that?"

"I can only give you what I surmise to be the case," replied the doctor. "We were tempted here by seeing how beautiful and fruitful everything was."

"Yes; everything but what we planted, and that tried to die out of the way as fast as it could. Well, sir, how was that?"

"Simply because the things we planted were strange to the land. All they wanted was time—years in which to root down to the best soil. If we had waited longer they would have appeared as good as they are now."

"That sounds well, sir," said Griggs, "and I should like to hear a little more about it, but I think we've got as much to think about as we can bear to-night. What say you?"

"That I shall be thankful for a good night's rest," was the reply, and soon after all was silent within the lonely

ranch, both the lads lying listening to the varied sounds without, for to one of them it seemed as if all the wild creatures of the forest were holding a meeting to inquire into the fresh invasion of a tract of land out of which they had been driven years before, but to which they had returned upon its being deserted, while now the question was in respect of a new invasion, and whether those who had taken possession intended to stay.





CHAPTER LVI

LIKE TO GO AGAIN?

CHRIS LEE had the impression next morning that he had lain for hours listening to the strange cries of wild creatures which had once more made the plantations their home, and he smiled at the idea that had come to him respecting a meeting, when he rose from the blanket and saddle bed, upon which he had slept better than he remembered ever to have done in his life.

His first look was at the place Ned had occupied; but he was already gone, and upon hurrying out he came upon him just visible as he forced his way through the tall growth with an orange in each hand and half-a-dozen tucked into his breast.

"Morning," he shouted. "I've been down to the river. It seems full of fish."

"That's good news," cried Chris.

"Isn't it? But look here, there'll be a long talk over breakfast this morning about—— Seen Griggs?"

"No. But why will they talk about him over breakfast?"

"Stuff! I didn't mean that. He came to the river with me, and he's gone now to light a fire and boil the kettle. He wants to talk to you as he did to me."

"What about?"

"What about? Why, about this place. He's red hot

over it, and says it would be madness to go away now and give up real gold for what may after all be nothing better than a dream. What do you think?"

"I?" said Chris, laughing. "That I've had enough fighting and tramping to last me for many years to come."

"Then if I say I'll stay, will you?"

"I don't know yet," said Chris.

"What! Why, you're never going to run back?"

"I'm not going to run back, nor run forward," replied Chris. "I'm going to do just what my father does, and in spite of your talk I believe you'll stand by Mr. Bourne."

"Of course," cried Ned; "but he's sure to say he'll stay. There's only your father and Wilton on the other side, so we shall be four to two if you'll stand by me. Now what do you say?"

"Nothing at present; let's wait."

Ned pressed for a definite promise, but Chris remained firm and went to help Griggs in his preparation of the first breakfast that had been eaten upon the old hearth for two years.

It was rough; but appetite would have made up for that, only it seemed wanting, and the steaming coffee and tough damper bread remained almost untasted for a time, every one being thoughtful and silent.

At last the doctor spoke.

"Look here," he said, "I've got something upon my mind, and judging from your looks it seems to me that every one is not only troubled in the same way, but eager to get that something off. Am I right in coming to the conclusion that you are all thinking of the same thing?"

"I guess I am," said Griggs.

"I'm sure I am," said Bourne.

"I'm thinking that the sooner we get to work the better," said Wilton.

"That's soon settled, then," said the doctor, "for there is no occasion to ask the boys—it's written plainly in both their faces. We all think that it would be madness to talk of leaving such a home as we can make of this."

"All!" came in chorus, and then the appetite for break-

fast, while they worked afterwards as they had never worked before to master and drive back the encroaching forest ; fetch stores with their mule-train from the distant port ; rebuild and restore ; and in due time plant, gather, and farm, to provide the necessaries of life, till Golden Hollow, as it was renamed, became a veritable Eden—a home which attracted others, till as time went on the peril finders' struggle to grasp at the phantom gold seemed to grow more and more like some exciting dream.

"Ever think of the shooting now, boys ?" said Griggs one day, as he stood by the side of the great green basket of fruit he had gathered and just set down, to turn over some half-a-dozen that were beginning to glow like gold.

"Not often," said Ned, "but it will come at times."

"Do you ?" said Griggs, turning to Chris, who looked thoughtful.

"Yes: I did only yesterday," was the reply. "I was at the bottom of the big peach-orchard, when I regularly jumped, for there was a sharp whizz close to my ear, and I began to think of the Indians hiding behind every bush."

"But it couldn't have been an arrow," cried Griggs.

"No ; only a hawk making a dash at one of those blue-breasted birds ; but it set me thinking of arrows flying, and using one's rifle too."

"Ah, rough times those," said Griggs, picking up two oranges, and then a third, to keep them, juggler fashion, following one another through the air. "Like to go again ?"

"No !" shouted Chris and Ned together, in a way which disconcerted the juggler so that the oranges all came down, to be picked up quickly, as the American said sharply—

"Same here. Once was enough."

THE END.

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